

SPOTLIGHT

THE FIRST RAYS OF THE SUN

THINKING OUT LOUD ON THE PAHELA BAISHAKH INCIDENT

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PHOTOS: PRABIR DAS

Liton Nandi, Suman Sengupta and Amit Dey have now become household names - only because they jumped in to save their fellow female counterparts, who like the rest of the people that day, were simply having fun with their family members and loved ones. "We were returning from a meeting and happened to be at the TSC area," says Liton Nandi, President of Chhatra Union. "There were thousands of people in the area. Even then, we could figure out that a

group of men were deliberately trying to create a gridlock. I sensed that something was terribly wrong. We could only hear someone screaming. As soon as we reached the spot, we saw that the group of men was gnawing at the girl, while her husband or boyfriend was trying to protect her." According to Nandi, the girl did not have any clothes on her. Her sari had come off. The men were groping and grabbing at her. "We tried to stop the men from attacking; at one point we also



THE UNCOMFORTABLE TRUTH

ANIKA HOSSAIN

The incident of sexual assault that took place this Pahela Baishakh on the Dhaka University campus was not the first of its kind. This incident just happens to be very well documented. Sexual harassment happens every single day to women all over the country—that is what we as a society must first learn to acknowledge before we can do something about it. "Socially, we have not created an environment which makes this behaviour strongly objectionable," says psychiatrist Dr Omar Rahman. "This is a deeply patriarchal male-centric society where women's mobility is severely constrained," he says. "Looking at it

from a regional perspective, sexual harassment is more rampant in North India rather than the South, and Kolkata, which is not even 200 miles from us, is one of the safest cities in the subcontinent. This has less to do with education and more to do with the attitude toward women," he explains. According to Dr Rahman, the social context overrides the psychological one in this case. "The psychology of the perpetrators is that they can get away with it. It would be a big mistake to think these people are somehow mentally ill. These men most likely come from backgrounds where their mothers and sisters don't go out alone in public or with other men, and they dress a certain way, therefore, they conclude that those who do, are bad

charactered women, 'They are wrong and I am right, so it doesn't matter what I do or say to them,' is what they are thinking." These men attack women not only to derive sexual pleasure, but in a way, to teach them a lesson. "The first step towards making a change would be to have exemplary punishment for the perpetrators, to send out a strong message that this will not be condoned," says Dr Rahman. "Law enforcement officers should also be sensitised to the issue of sexual violence, which is not just limited to rape. In a situation like this, where there is so much media attention and documentation, if nothing happens, it sends the message that the society does not care," he opines.

Lack of punishment for these crimes creates a vicious cycle, where parents respond to the threat of sexual violence by denying their daughters a level of freedom that is their basic right, in order to protect them. This reinforces the idea that a woman's rightful place is inside the home. Sensitising men about these issues from a young age is one way to deal with the problem, but that will not happen overnight. The message women are taking away from this incident is "Don't go out, you will encounter men like this," instead, we should send out the message that says, "Don't harass women, there will be consequences." These are uncomfortable truths a society has to deal with, if it wants to make progress.

began to hit the men to make them stop," Nandi remembers. "Eventually, I took off my Panjabi and gave it to the girl so that she could cover herself. The girl got on a rickshaw, fixed her clothes and returned my Panjabi to me." A few feet away, the rescuers found yet another group of men attacking a young girl of not more than 16-18 years of age. "She fell to the ground because of all the gnawing and groping," says Nandi. "I realised that the girl would die under the stampede. We ran to the spot and were literally begging the men to stop. She is going to die - I shouted to the men. Please let her go!" It was only when everything had calmed down that Nandi realised that he had a broken arm. Even though an outrage over the incident spread like wild-fire in the country, many young people, especially young men, find it hard to digest the fact that women can roam about freely in the city. "Why do they not cover themselves? 'Why do they entice the men to attack them?' - have been the opinion belonging

the problems start! The men and women, especially in their late teens and early twenties, feel awkward around each other, despite the fact that they study together or even work together," says Rakiba. "Somehow, the idea of sharing an idea with a woman or watching them do something completely normal in a public platform - a platform that has always been 'owned' by the male- is difficult." Sultana speaks of a workshop session she had conducted on business writing skills, where she had invited young male and female students to attend. "The boys and girls were sitting in groups where the boys would not bother to speak to the girls and vice versa," says Sultana. "I conducted some ice breaking sessions and eventually the boys and girls acknowledged each others' presence, shared ideas and also worked in groups. This is something that should be done in our homes, neighbourhoods and schools, so that when young boys and girls grow up, they do not find it difficult to participate in the real world. Speaking and sharing do not mean promoting indecent behavior as



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to many of the young men, both online and offline. "The society has not changed as much as we would like it to, unfortunately," opines Rakiba Sultana. A final year master's student of Sociology and also a researcher at the National University, Sultana regularly conducts workshops with young male and female students. She feels that Bangladeshi men, in general, are still not used to the fact that female counterparts exist. "And that is where all

many claim! It is simply the first of many steps to respecting each other." People should stand up, stay united and speak up against such atrocities - they say. There should have been more people to help the women that day at the TSC area on Pahela Baishakh. If a woman is molested by 20-30 men in broad daylight, in the midst of thousands of people celebrating Baishakh, one simply wonders about the millions of women molested, sexually abused, harassed and raped - every 30 minutes in the country. In fact, Liton Nandi and his team have been referred to as 'delusional' by the Proctor of DU and have also been accused of stretching the matter too far. "After the rescue attempts on April 14, I realised why regular people do not come forward to help others in need on the streets," says Liton Nandi. "My friends and I did so, but despite being a student politician for the last many years, I am being attacked and pulled into the blame game by the authorities." Nandi is doing everything he can to protect the others as well as himself from the vicious blame game. What would you and I do in this situation? ■