

Shahzadi Begum sat on her bed, her eyes firmly on the recording device set before her. She wore a smile across her face, belying the apprehension evident in her eyes. "When they were asking people if they wanted to go to Pakistan, I wanted to go too. It sounded like such a wonderful place," Shahzadi responds when asked about the repatriation decision. "I don't anymore. I have lived in this country for so many years; everything I know is here," she adds, a sudden blush streaking across her face. Shahzadi Begum moved to Geneva Camp, one of the largest camps housing the so-called "Stranded Pakistanis" located in the heart of the capital city, with her husband. A people persecuted ever since independence, Shahzadi's story is all too similar to the thousands of others who

remarks, beaming. The pride she has can be seen in the house itself; it is as clean as can be, perfectly juxtaposed against the environment outside. "I have no complaints," Shahzadi says before mentioning the difficulty she has in using the communal toilets, having to stand in line for hours. Apart from that, she doesn't have much to say. It may also be because she doesn't want to say much. She seems content, almost happy, in this place of hers, where there is just about enough for everybody but not a lot for anyone. The sultry afternoon heat, coupled with a sudden power outage, finally convinces Shahzadi to go outside. She sits on her doorsteps, just like others around her, each doorstep featuring one individual plucked on top, engaging in conversations with their neighbours. The sense of community

here is unmistakable. For a people so long persecuted, their unity makes almost a tragic sense. When many among them finally wish to stake out in the greater world on their own, it is a decision celebrated. Even though it is extremely difficult for those who have lived here to rent homes outside, the Geneva Camp address working purely as a deterrent for many landlords, there have been a few who have managed quite well to be accepted by the mainstream Bangali society. However, no one stays away for too long. Mohammad Hussain*, a former resident of the Geneva Camp, recalls his days here quite fondly. "This is where I grew up so of course I have deep roots. For instance, every weekend I bring my mother back here so she can meet everybody and they can all gossip," Hussain says. The

recognition," Hussain reaffirms. The current generation has successfully made the transition and now hopes the same for all their peers, but again their loyalty to their roots remain. "We love our country and we love our community so much so that when one of us dies, the body is brought back here so everyone they ever knew or loved could pay them their final respect," Hussain informs. A sudden burst of cheers is heard above the cacophony of voices. A wicket has fallen in the ongoing cricket match. It seems one house has power only and the others have gathered at the doorstep to watch the match. Someone brings over a pitcher of water and everyone has a gulp. With little resources, much is shared. The discussion halts as everyone returns to watching the game. Some watch further away from the others; class politics is one that no community can shake off easily, it seemed.

The Bangladeshis in Geneva Camp though have begun to shake off the stigma attached to their past. As they progress further, their integration will be soothed. But before that they will all fully comprehend what this nation tried to do

HUMAN RIGHTS

OPINION

It could've been my sister, it could've been my mother, it could've been me'. Every time the media reports on a story of a woman's rape, the bulk of general opinion seems to revolve around this issue of imagining what it would be like if the other women in your family are raped. And that, then, becomes the origin of our outrage. Less so that it has happened, but more so that hypothetically it could have happened to someone close to you. And even then, it is less so about the extreme level of violence that they would face and more so about how *I*, the protagonist of the world (almost always a man), would feel if it had happened to them. A very selfish shame, then, fuels the outrage.

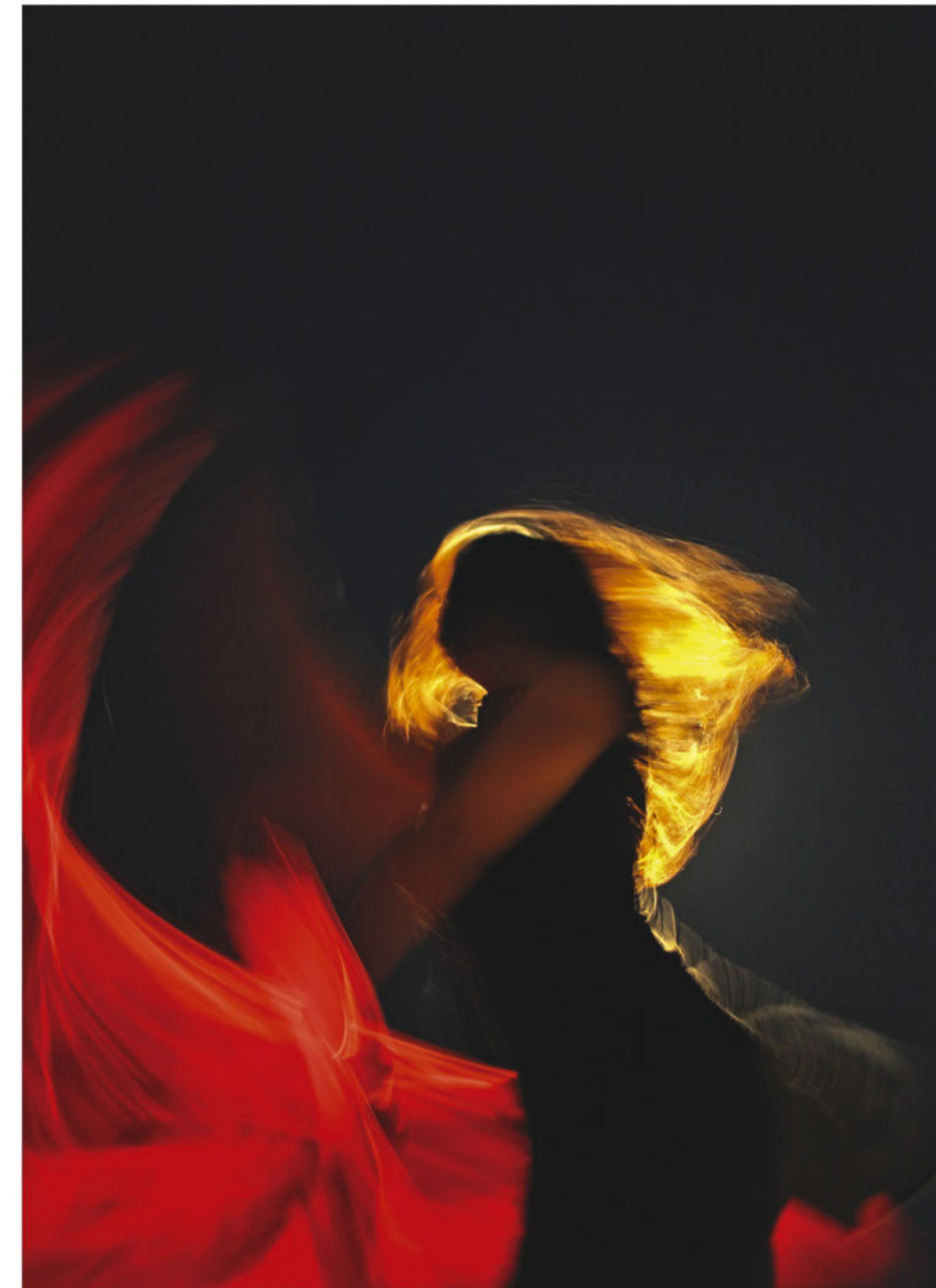
And yet, there is more to add to the line with which we began. Think back to the Pahela Baishakh mass sexual assault incident. It instigated a kind of condemnation from the civil society like never before-- that it happened in front of thousands of others and, even more so, that it happened at TSC during a festival to celebrate the Bengali New Year. Think of the very recent news about the rape and murder of Shohagi Tonu inside the Comilla cantonment area. There was outrage yet again, perhaps even more vociferous outrage, as we came to terms with the fact that rape had taken place inside the confines of an area assumed to be safe. It created a rupture in our media narratives of what it means to be safe and who is actually there to keep us safe.

If even the 'most guarded' parts of the country are not safe for its citizens (specifically non-males) then what choice do we have but to take to the streets? However, while the Pahela Baishakh assault incident and the rape and murder of Tonu brought out large public protests, the news that in the past eight years, 434 indigenous women and girls have faced sexual abuse, harassment and rape could only muster a roundtable of discussion (report: Social Realities of Indigenous Women 2015). In none of these reported cases has there ever been justice served, according to the report, and that most of the alleged perpetrators have been Bangali settlers. Let's add to our sentence again, which now begins to rhyme:

*'It could've been my sister,
It could've been my mother,
It could've been me,
It could've been another Bangali'*

OF RAPE AND SELECTIVE OUTRAGE

AHMAD IBRAHIM
PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO



Before we move on, let us take a moment to reflect on the rapes and assaults that go unreported-- so deeply invisible are these bodies that they cannot be perceived to ever have been raped. They are scoffed at by the law, by the police, by the medical examiners and by the general public at large-- the Bihari women, the indigenous men and women, the Hijras, the differently-abled, the homosexual. There are some stories at which we feel angry, and some which we do not believe. Whose voice is believable when they come forward with a story of rape?

When rape breaks the hegemony of civil society, feathers are ruffled. However, when rape is a systematic tool for the destruction and destabilisation of an entire group, like it was during the 1971 war, when the Pakistani Army raped and assaulted en masse, and like it is even today in some regions of the country, no one really speaks of it. What, then, are we to learn from our own reactions in a country where rape happens everywhere but only a select few are spoken of?

Today, the protests for Tonu's rape and murder are still ongoing and long may they continue, for we still have a way to go before we are able to break out of our narratives of Bangali nationalism, our narratives of viewing women's bodies as valuable only when they are related to us (every other body is disposable), our narratives of viewing Hijra bodies, gay and lesbian bodies as not 'worthy' enough to be angry about. Is it not rape, then, if we (the urban-centric, Bangali, middle-class dwellers) cannot relate to it?

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DISPLACED IN DYSTOPIA

OSAMA RAHMAN

PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

also call this little place in their city their home. While our current discourse has often attempted to alienate these individuals, to be forgotten in the recesses of history, a landmark verdict granted them citizenship back in 2008 bringing them to the fleeting national consciousness. Since then, much has changed but perhaps not enough to make a marked difference.

Shahzadi Begum's husband worked in the railway industry; a common profession of choice for those who had migrated here from Bihar, an Indian state known for the same industry. However, before she arrived in the camp, Shahzadi used to live in the city. She cannot recollect the name of her previous area of residence, but she has happy memories of the time there living with her parents. After moving to Geneva Camp, Shahzadi saw a drastic change in her living conditions. The small room where she sits now has a large bed, a wardrobe shelf with a small 24" TV on top and some cooking utensils. This small room happens to also be her entire house. "My husband bought this for us a few years after our marriage," Shahzadi



camaraderie is best exemplified by the manner in which people greet Hussain, all seemingly elated to see him back and curious about his life outside the invisible prison of forged identities.

Mohammad Hussain himself is a shining example of how far the community has come and where it is headed next. The evidence of the change in generational dimension can be seen everywhere. While Hindi or Urdu can be heard, Bangla too isn't a surprise. And while some of the previous residents may have nurtured hopes to return to the Nation of Islam, the current generation shares no such affinity with a foreign nation. "We are Bangladeshis and we deserve the same

to them. They will fully understand why they were deprived of the right to vote, to educate themselves, to even go to the doctor, and to simply live like humans. But whatever the case, they will not forget the place they have called home for the last 45 years or so. Perhaps it is time to kick-start the debate not on rehabilitation but on reconstruction. The country gave them a cage and they turned it into a sign of their defiance and resilience. Should we now force them out of the cage as well? Or should we let the Shahzadis and Hussain's pen their own journey, as we have let them do so, ever since we began to say we were independent? ■

NUMBERS

6000

The number of people who died of Tuberculosis (TB) in the country last year. According to National Tuberculosis Control Programme (NTP), more than 200,000 people were diagnosed with TB, while the death figure might be 80,000 a year as many of these cases remain undetected. As TB remains a global epidemic, World Health Organisation (WHO) observed World TB Day on March 24, with the theme "Unite to End TB."



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