

SPOTLIGHT

As we began last week with the Bengali new year, and hope to let go of the past and hit the restart button, we remember the horrendous day from last year, when on Pahela Baishakh, April 14, 2015, female visitors, of all ages, in the Dhaka University area were molested by gangs of men, touched, groped and stripped off of their clothes. Despite thousands protesting on the streets and demanding justice, as of the filing of this report, not a single perpetrator has been arrested.

This year, thousands took to the streets, once the news came in of the body of young student Sohagi Jahan Tonu being found inside Comilla Cantonment. Even though it is strongly suspected that Tonu was raped before she was brutally murdered, somehow the authorities think otherwise and have finally declared to the media and public that no signs of rape have been found on Tonu's body. In fact, one still awaits the second autopsy report, since the doctors could not find out how Tonu died and thus, the first autopsy report remains negative.

This leads one to question the authorities and society in general. Why is being raped seen as something the victim should be shameful for? Why do we hesitate to talk about it, let alone investigate a rape case and let people know the truth? Despite living in a set up where there are severe punishments for molesters and rapists, why do we deny to identify them, recognise them and as a nation, move against them?

In the last one month alone, at least 10 reports of rape cases have been reported by the Daily Star, some of the



TURNING A BLIND EYE

victims mercilessly killed after being raped. One reported case is of a young boy in Chittagong who was raped not too far from home by a group of young men. Clearly, both women and children from all walks of life now face danger, as the law is unable to protect them. Somehow, attackers, molesters and rapists now feel that they can commit the crime and get away with it.

This year in January, a man was held for allegedly trying to rape an indigenous woman at her residence in Dewan Bari

FACTS AND FIGURES ON RAPES AND ASSAULTS

ELITA KARIM

PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

area of Dhaka. The man fled the scene when the 23-year-old Garo woman screamed for help, according to Sub-Inspector Shamsul Alam of the Dakkhin Khan Police Station. The accused was arrested within hours.

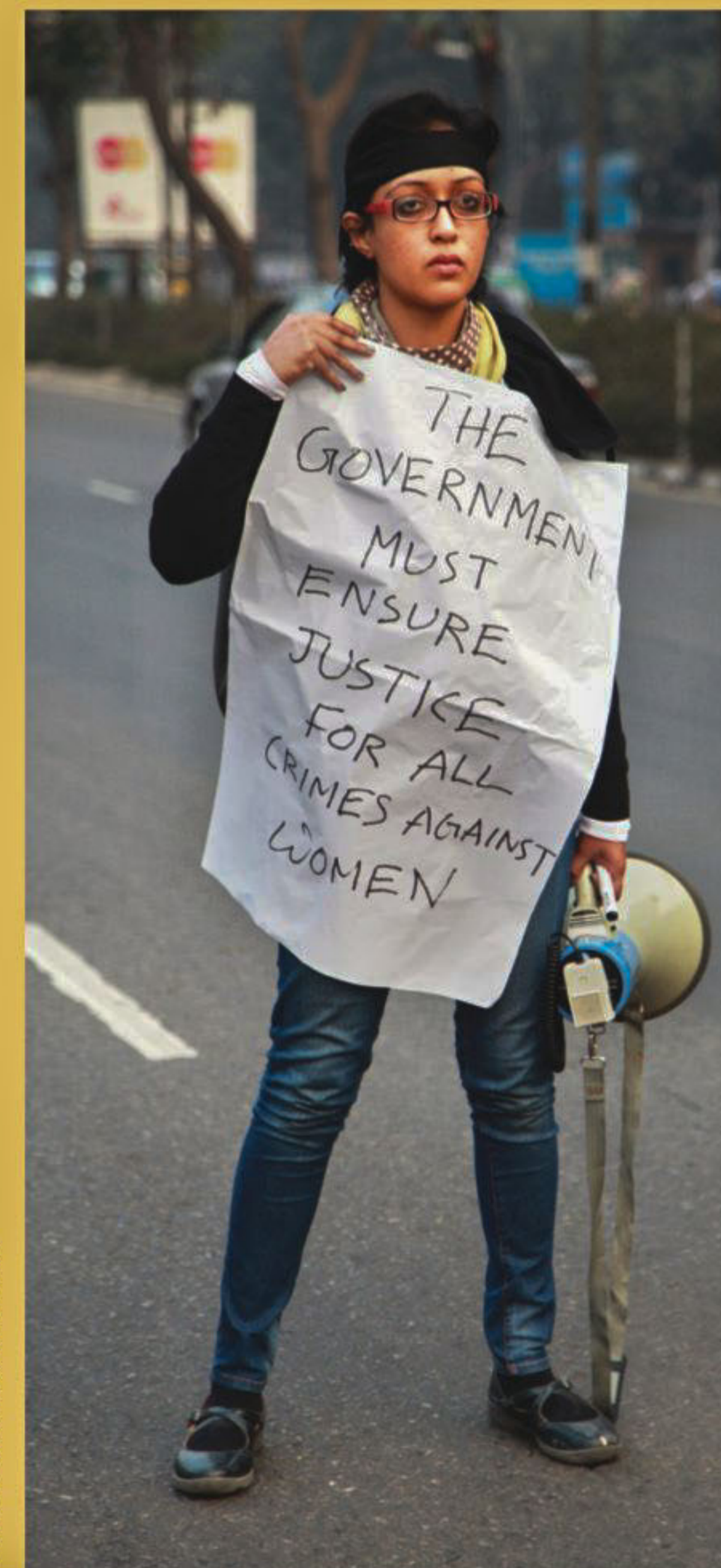
A Hindu woman was raped twice because she was seeking justice! In January this year, the woman was raped by the same man in the span of just three days in Baniarchang upazila of Habiganj. The first incident of rape reportedly took place in the victim's house at Uttar Sangor village on January 14, and she was raped again at her home in the early hours after three days. The culprit, Monu Miah, younger brother of a local Awami League leader, was arrested after the victim filed a case.

In February this year, a teenage girl was murdered at her Khetachira village in Mathbaria upazila of Pirojpur, after allegedly being raped. She was raped in the paddy field at 6:00 am in the morning.

Last month, a 13-year-old house help was said to be raped and killed in Mirpur, Dhaka. Locals and family



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN



members of the deceased teenager laid siege to Kafrul Police Station and NAM Garden Officers' Quarters at Mirpur, demanding arrest of the people who "raped and killed the girl". Police found the body of Jonia next to the building of her employer hours after she went there that morning. Jonia's father Osman accused the government official, his son, and wife, of killing Jonia after raping her, according to Sub-Inspector Kamruzzaman of Kafrul Police Station, who is investigating the case. When a neighbour was washing Jonia's body, as part of her last rites, two bite marks on her chest and several scratch marks on her body were allegedly discovered.

Earlier this month, a woman was gang raped by three men on a Friday morning in the 'Binimoy Paribahan' bus, which was heading for Dhaka from Modhupur's Dhanbarhi. The accused – driver 'Nayan' and his assistants 'Rezaul' and 'Abdul Khalek' – were arrested, amongst the accused nine, later in the afternoon in the Dhanbarhi bus stand area. According to the victim, there were no other passengers in the bus when it started moving. The three culprits took turns in raping her after tying her up in the moving bus. Locals rescued her after they threw her off the bus on the Modhupur-Mymensingh road.

In December, 2015, Ain o Salish Kendra (ASK) reported that at least 752 women were raped and 94 others became victims of rape attempts in 2015

alone. Of the victims, 60 were killed after rape. Majority of the victims were aged between seven and 18. The report also mentioned that at least eight members of law enforcement agencies were allegedly involved in the incidents of rape in 2015.

According to a very recent report published last month, around 434 women and female children were sexually assaulted in the last 8 years (2007-2008). According to studies by Manusher Jonno, Kapaeeng Foundation and Bangladeshi Indigenous Women's Network, last year at least 14 women were raped, 12 were gang-raped and 16 women became victims to attempted rape. None of these reported cases have seen the light of justice till today. The report further states that at least 245 indigenous women have been either raped or sexually harassed in different parts of the country since 2007 but none of the perpetrators were punished.

Hundreds and thousands take to the streets every day to protest sexual assaults, which seem to be increasing by the number every day. Yet, response from the authorities has been slow; almost invisible in some cases. Clearly, justice will just have to wait.

Earlier this month, Chhatra Union brought out a procession in Dhaka demanding trial of the incidents of murder and rape including the recent murder of Sohagi Jahan Tonu. They started the rally under the banner of



"Pritilota Brigade" protesting against rapists. The platform announced to train up females to learn the methods of self protection from April 8. "The state, which pampers the rapists, will not ensure security for females," exclaimed BCU President Lucky Akhter. "So, there is no alternative left but to be united and protect ourselves!"

Home has become frightening for many. With law enforcers and authorities not helping out by giving out stricter and faster judgment, the perpetrators are indeed enjoying the barbaric backwardness of the society.

However, the protests will go and must not stop. If anything, these protests are what define humanity and lets one believe that we indeed to live in a civilised world. ■

