

Social ripples of rape

The Daily Star

FOUNDER EDITOR
LATE S. M. ALI

DHAKA SUNDAY MAY 14, 2017, BAISHAKH 31, 1424 BS

Women tortured and humiliated by land grabbers

Remove the impunity of the influential

INTIMIDATION through violence to grab the land of the helpless is an age-old practice in our country where those with influence and power often go scot free for their crimes. But the two news stories on the same day, of two middle-aged women, one a divorcee another a widow, being beaten and disrobed in a bid to grab their land, displays the helplessness of the marginalised. We are appalled at such barbarity and vehemently protest the humiliation and injustice inflicted on these women, both of whom risk losing their land.

In the Thakurgaon case, a ruling party activist and UP member, along with their goons, tortured a divorcee and her neighbor, a co-owner of the land, demanding money as well as handover of the land. According to the victim, when she went to the chairman for help he instructed his men to beat her further. In the other case in Patukhali, a widow who lived with her son, was subject to ruthless beating when she protested land grabbers led by an influential lord, building a house on her land.

It is reassuring that the local police have arrested the party activist and UP member in the Thakurgaon case while in the second case law enforcers have said they will arrest the accused. But from our experience we have seen how the power of influence gives impunity to many delinquents in society and leaves the poor and helpless with nothing except fear and the memory of their torture. We hope that in these two cases in which two helpless women have been publicly humiliated, tortured and may lose their land, the law will work towards providing them justice and punishing the criminals regardless of their affiliation.

Monitoring cells for women and child repression cases

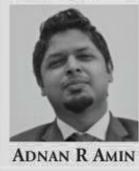
Other reforms needed to ensure implementation of law

A laudable provision of the Women and Children Repression Prevention Act, 2000 makes it mandatory for lower courts which are dealing with cases under the law to dispose with them within 180 days of framing charges. However, last year, the Supreme Court observed that this provision is almost never followed in reality. Now, the High Court has directed that the Supreme Court form a cell to monitor whether these trials under the act are being conducted on time. It also set out that the cell will report to the SC and the government for taking appropriate action against judges, public prosecutors and investigation officers who fail to show valid causes for not disposing the cases within the stipulated period.

The need for the monitoring cell speaks volumes of the lack of implementation of the law. The timeframe set out by the law would not only ensure that these cases do not get buried for whatever reason but also ensure that the accused do not have to be in jail for extended periods without being convicted. We hope that the monitoring cell would be adequately empowered to ensure accountability and act as a check to unwarranted delays. It is unfortunate that despite the existence of the law, there are cases which run on for years. This not only delays justice for that case, but creates a backlog for the courts.

However, for the monitoring cell and the law to be effective, it must be followed up with other institutional reforms. We still hear of cases where the police are reluctant to accept cases and there are shortcomings in providing a safe environment where a victim can demand justice. We commend the HC decision and hope it will be followed by further steps from all concerned authorities to address the institutional and legal gaps as they exist.

THE MIDDLE PATH



ADNAN R AMIN

WHEN alleged rapist Shafat Ahmed and accomplice Shadman Sakif were arrested, and the former's father brought under investigation, I had decided not to write about the

rape incident that took place in a hotel in Banani. The actual rapes have, sadly, been described to some detail – and no one, but the culprits, needs to relive the barbarity of it. But what, perhaps, needs recording are the social ripples generated by the episode.

Of course, the first order of business is a backlash against the disproportionate favour bestowed upon the victims by society and media reports alike. "Why do you not act thus when it happens outside of Banani?" And it is a justified question. In fact, this is precisely what made me reluctant to write about this. Why relegate Hazrat Ali and Ayesha to the rail-tracks, but leap to clicktivism over this? But we know why: we are a classist and tribalist lot. And that isn't the issue here. The issue is 'rape'.

To accept that we are inherently flawed and biased is perhaps a first step in starting this long-overdue conversation about rape. That it had to start from this incident is, for now, an insignificant detail. However, the beginning of a nuanced discussion of rape is not in itself an insignificant detail.

From a purely analytical standpoint, the case has some important features. The victims overcame the paralyzing fear of stigma and spoke out. Once they spoke out, they found public support. This will no doubt set a precedent and encourage others to come forward. Citizens have already shown their support for the young women. It is time for mass media to demonstrate how delicately they are able to handle these cases and thus encourage future victims to be candid in their quest for justice.

The aggrieved party also managed to find a powerful narrative that worked in their favour. The goal was not only to evoke sympathy, but also to trigger action. For example, the two victims were referred to as 'students' – a category that is traditionally associated with idealism and positivity. Narration of the lopsided power dynamics – both between the tormentors and the victims and their respective families – helped generate public empathy. And where law and order systems need to be pressurised into action by public opinion – these are important reminders for all.

Of course, law enforcement officers deserve credit for rounding up two of the suspects. I hope the other rapist – the now-disowned con artist and event-

manager – does not disappear into the smog of misinformation and political clout (if it weren't illegal and illiberal, I would've happily convened a lynch mob in this man's honour). But the two arrests are important: especially considering that Banani police at first refused to take the plaintiffs' case for several days. Perhaps more than the actual crimes, the thought of police kowtowing before influential quarters was what ignited a social media storm. Photos showing the alleged rapists posing for photograph(s) inside a police station further fuelled the rage.

While arresting suspects redeems the force to some extent, it is also important to hold an inquiry into if and why lodging of a case had been initially stalled. In that connection, it is also important to evaluate and improve how law enforcement officers interact with victims of violence against women. This

ridiculed, social media chatter certainly buoyed this incident and forced mainstream media to follow-up the story. It was thus that the suspects' fathers and their behind-the-scenes rescue efforts became known. And it was thus that their businesses were identified, and in a few cases, boycotted. Once Facebook users began unearthing and passing on to media inconvenient photos and connections, law enforcement activity seemed to gain momentum.

So, in a way, your Facebook post and your discussion actually helped arrest the alleged rapists. However, only so many cases can reach such a critical mass and exert pressure on authorities. In the end, there is no other recourse to investigating institutional failures.

What does need to be reiterated is a concern about the language in which all above parties discuss rape. In Bangla, we

We punish illegitimate violence. Fullstop.

Lastly, because sexual violence is so emotionally-charged, it is difficult to talk about it without the fear of being misunderstood: but girls need to be cautious. They shouldn't have to be. But they need to be. Times have changed; men haven't. Therefore, anything from skimming through 'what-to-do-when' articles to pepper sprays to basic self-defence training will help. These days there are personal safety apps for smartphones that can alert a relative, friend or police station at the tap of a finger. I hope all these things will become obsolete one day. Sadly, that day isn't here yet.

After Jyoti Singh Pandey was raped in Delhi in 2012, a social tumult followed. Thousands upon thousands of citizens protested the language of victim-blaming and the central government's failure to provide enough security for women. A judicial committee was set up to explore



SOURCE: HERCAMPUS.COM

is 2017: we cannot have troglodytes manning the posts where tortured and vulnerable women are encouraged to seek restitution.

Mainstream media responded better. First off, journalists deserve a pat on the back for (a) not naming the victims and (b) keeping the focus on the alleged rapists. Even with raids on terror dens and loss of fireman Matin, they have commendably stuck to the story. What they ought to be reprimanded, if not prosecuted for, is how they hounded victims and staked out their homes. Still, I admit that reporting was responsible; sensational details were kept out. What did seep in – the political-power overtones, methamphetamine addiction and pretty ex-wife – eventually composed important parts of the story.

It has been pointed out that the social outpour stemmed largely from a sense of institutional failure. While routinely

must stop describing rape as a 'loss of honour' or a 'loss of virtue'. If anyone loses honour or virtue during a rape, it is undoubtedly the rapist. It is important to challenge the notion of 'honour' being located in a woman's vagina. At the same time, we must not equate rape to just any form of violence. We must remember that usually rape is also about patriarchy, inter-gender power dynamics and fragile masculinity. It is about inflicting the sense of loss of honour and virtue. It is as much a psychological assault as it is a physical one.

Every account needs to repeat that: rape is not an act of sex; it is an act of violence. Therefore, conversations about it must not be romanticised, sexualised or depicted as an outcome of prevailing situations, relationships or conflicts. The idiocy of invoking revealing clothing, sexual signals, respectable hours and unsafe spaces must be forever shunned. We live in civilised society.

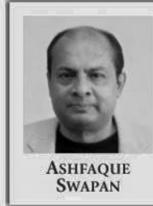
and take citizen suggestions about legal reforms that enabled speedy trials for rapists. Some 80,000 citizens were consulted before an amendment was passed to allow fast-tracking cases of violence against women.

Throughout this period, the victim was referred to only as 'Nirbhaya' or 'the fearless one'.

Many of us have sighed with relief after two of the rapists/accomplices were arrested recently. With this, we also need to think about what has been achieved. Have we changed minds? And deep-rooted patriarchal views of women's appearance and mobility? We can choose to term the arrests as marking the end to a sensational rape case. Or we can choose to see this as the beginning of a very important, candid and nuanced conversation about sexual violence.

The writer is a strategy and communications consultant.

How not to run in a US election



ASHFAQUE SWAPAN

THE election of Donald Trump as US president worries Bangladeshi Americans. Trump rode to victory on a wave of a nativist animus that has

given a new lease of life to racists and Islamophobes.

One way to fight back is to get involved in mainstream politics, but too many expatriate Bangladeshis are still too caught up in their perennial Awami League-BNP political feuds to look beyond.

It's time to take a page out of the playbook of other minorities. Latinos and Asian Americans have an impressive track record. In Atlanta, where I live, Nobel Peace laureate Martin Luther King Jr. created history in the 1960s with his victorious struggle to gain civil rights for African Americans.

However, there's a right way to go about it and a wrong way to go about it.

When Bangladeshi American Mohammad Ali Bhuiyan threw in his hat in the special Congressional race last April, he generated a fair amount of buzz among local Bangladeshis.

I would love to see a Bangladeshi – or an immigrant of colour, for that matter – get elected. However, I was deeply sceptical about Bhuiyan's chances.

A Congressional constituency is fairly large, and it's difficult for a first-generation immigrant to get widespread

local acceptance without any discernible local involvement.

The track record of successful minority immigrant politicians begins at a humbler place. They run for city council or the local school board. They show up at local city council meetings, organise around local issues, build networks and coalitions, and then move up the political ladder.

Bhuiyan likely thought it would be a clever move, because the rules were a little different in the special election that he ran.

For starters, he ran a lacklustre campaign. In this digital age, Bhuiyan's initial website was riddled with appalling grammatical errors. Credit to him for fixing those errors, but the final website still left a lot to be desired. Policy issues were dealt with brief, vague platitudes. There was little sign of much activity or coalition building.

Bhuiyan's electoral bid reeked of hypocrisy. He had earlier campaigned for Democratic senatorial candidate Jason Carter. His attempts to play down his

ordering them to open voter registration. Bhuiyan's candidate, Karen Handel, called it a Democratic "trick." That doesn't sound terribly democratic.

Bhuiyan's attempts to win Republicans faced an uphill task as well. He just did not have the local influence. His name recognition, such as it was, cut both ways. He created a splash when he led a multi-million-dollar effort to host a summit of Nobel Peace laureates in Atlanta, but when the effort collapsed, with Bangladeshi Nobel laureate Dr. Muhammad Yunus quitting the initiative, some blamed him.

In fact, you don't have to be a rocket scientist to figure out that Bhuiyan's bid was a hopelessly lost cause.

So why did he run? For one thing, Bangladeshi candidates tend to draw adulatory attention in the expatriate Bangla press and in Bangladesh, but the reportage is typically uninformed and hyped. Repeated instances of Bangladeshis failing disastrously in US elections raise the disturbing question whether electoral victory is really their goal.

Winning a paltry two percent of the vote – as Bhuiyan did – is a colossal waste of political energy of expatriate Bangladeshis.

What first-generation immigrants – particularly South Asians – must recognise – is that a Congressional race is too ambitious an entry-level political race. A candidate of foreign descent needs to build coalitions, and the way to do it is to spend years in local involvement. Show up at city council meetings. Run for city council. Run for the school board. Get active in local issues. Once credibility is built, acceptance will follow, but it will take time.

If Bangladeshi Americans can learn the right lessons, the losses will not have been in vain. Otherwise, these candidacies will just be forgettable political curiosities. Political analysts have an acerbic epithet for it: a "vanity candidacy," a campaign that's little more than a self-indulgent exercise to enjoy the fleeting media limelight. In other words, Andy Warhol's proverbial 15 minutes of fame.

The writer is a contributing editor for *Siliconeer*, a monthly periodical for South Asians in the United States.



Campaign posters of Dr. Mohammad Ali Bhuiyan, a former vice president of Alabama's Tuskegee University, who ran for Congress as a Republican candidate in a special election in Georgia's 6th Congressional district.

Here all candidates – Republican and Democratic – run together in a "jungle" primary. A candidate who wins an absolute majority is elected outright. Otherwise, the top two vote getters compete in another run-off race.

While making his pitch Bhuiyan told Bangladeshi Americans that with a gaggle of Republicans running, all he needed was 5,000 votes to make it to the run-off. Given the fact that Bangladeshis, like all minorities, are overwhelmingly Democratic Party supporters, he tried to finesse his Republican credentials by soft-peddalling the issue.

It turned out that voters, Bangladeshi or otherwise, did not buy it. He failed abysmally, getting less than 500 votes in an election where 192,000 votes were cast.

So, what went wrong?

Republican leanings turned out to be misleading, because after the election, he declared his support for the Republican candidate Karen Handel.

He is perfectly entitled to do that, but had he said that before, he would have a hard time campaigning among Bangladeshis.

You can make the case that partisan considerations should be secondary when Bangladeshis run for office. But this is the Deep South. This is the region where all the racist whites migrated en masse to the Republican Party in the 1960s after Democratic President Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act. Even today, Republicans try to suppress minority voting by tightening rules. Their pretext is voter fraud, which scholars scoff at. A federal judge recently ruled against Georgia Republicans,

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

letters@thedailystar.net

Rampal Power Plant - A suicide mission

The decision of setting up a 1320 Megawatt Rampal Power Plant 14 km away from the world's largest mangrove forest is running the gauntlet worldwide. A study shows that almost every developed country stands against coal-based power plants today. The government is claiming that they will use a Super Critical Technology to prevent pollution. But if they couldn't save Buriganga, how will they deal with the Sundarbans any differently?

The contract between the National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC) of India and the Power Development Board of Bangladesh is vague and evasive. According to a statement by the National Committee to Protect the Sundarbans, the NTPC is willing to cover only 15 percent of the total expenditure, with the residual 85 percent funded through our own investments or loans. But the NTPC are claiming 50 percent of the profits.

We do need electricity, but not at the cost of the Sundarbans.

Rasel Rana
Jahangirnagar University

If Bangladeshi Americans can learn the right lessons, the losses will not have been in vain. Otherwise, these candidacies will just be forgettable political curiosities.