



PHOTO: THAHNAN FERDOUS

"If at first the idea is not absurd, then there is no hope for it."
— Albert Einstein

SNAPSHOT

OPINION

News stories of two young women accusing the son of a well known jewellery store and one of his friends, of raping them at a hotel in Banani after a birthday party, are doing the rounds, evoking all sorts of reactions among the public. Among these reactions are the ones that we all expect—that they were 'bad girls', that they were wearing western clothes and attending late night parties with men, that they had it coming, that it was a big scam to extort money and so on. Public shaming of rape victims who do not conform to the patriarchal definition of the 'good woman' is still very much a part of why so many rapists go scot free. It is why many women prefer to suffer the ordeal of knowing nothing will happen to the man/men who have left her with the worst kind of trauma, rather than disclose the truth. Strangely, even those who do conform to the ideals of a 'pure woman' will somehow be stigmatised for life. This holds true whether the victim is a seven-year-old child, a 16-year-old schoolgirl or even an 80-year-old grandmother—the shame will never leave them. Because society will not let go of that shame.

Society, on the other hand, is generally more lenient towards sex offenders, although in the Banani rape cases the pressure created by social and mainstream media has led to the arrest of two of the accused. Many newspapers have published pictures of the accused and given details about their apparent decadent lifestyle, sadly confirming the stereotypical image depicted in Bangla commercial cinema and TV serials, of the spoilt rich kid going too far with his debauchery and a father who seems to be condoning it. Hence the enthusiasm of the media to pursue this case exposing the alleged rapists and condemning their crime. But what if the rapist was just the local goon of a remote village or small town far from the city, and the victim, the daughter of an ordinary man with no connections? First of all, the news mainstream media provides is usually a sketchy report that gets lost in the multitude of reports. Follow ups are rare. Secondly, apart from the initial outrage, social media interest wanes very easily while mainstream media moves on to the next horrific crime.

Meanwhile, in that remote village or forgotten neighbourhood, the victim becomes the subject of all kinds of humiliation. If a case is lodged and the police actually takes it, there is a high chance of the incident being settled out of court through an arbitrary, unofficial

WHERE RAPISTS DO NOT FEAR TO TREAD

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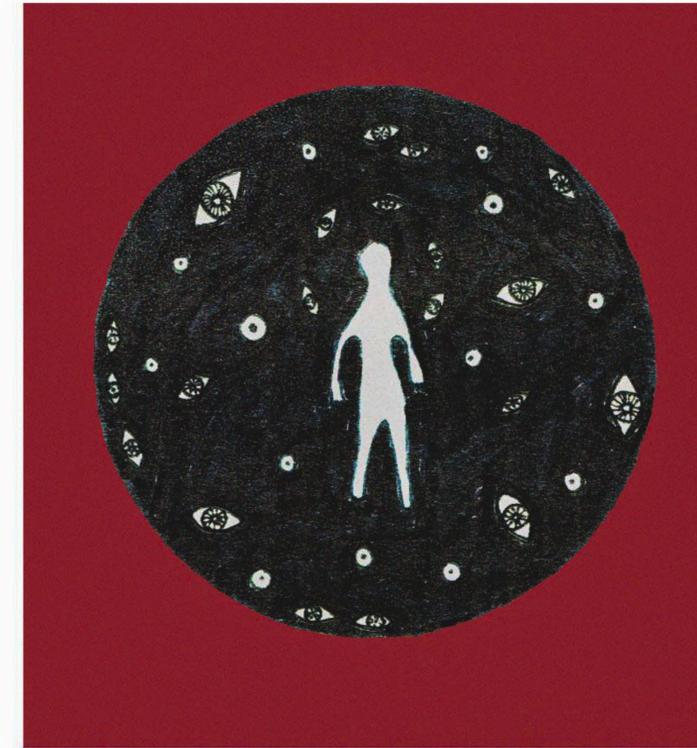


ILLUSTRATION: KAZI TAHSSIN AGAZ APURBO

arbitration or through threats of dire consequences if the case is pursued any further. The rapist is often in a position of greater power in terms of both finances and connections and enjoys the indulgence of his family. This pretty much ensures that the rapist will eventually go scot free. Only a small number of them actually get sentences.

While the law dealing with rape is stringent, the process of getting legal redress ends up being formidable for

the victim and favourable for the accused, an extension of a culture that is grossly discriminatory against females. Boys grow up in a society that allows them to be entitled and with a conviction that women are inferior to them and born to serve. Thus wife beating, sexual harassment and sexual violence are not seen as heinous crimes but rather as "misdemeanours" that should not be made too much fuss over. It is only when the misdemeanour goes

against the norms of society, such as when an infant is molested or a woman is killed after rape, that some public outrage is seen though that too will die down with time.

In a city like Dhaka, when the accused is from the wealthy classes, it is more likely that the case will get far more public and media scrutiny. What is encouraging about the Banani case is that despite reports that the accused have tried to use their political connections and wads of cash to get the police to not take the case, two of the key suspects and two of the abettors have been arrested. What is discouraging is that despite reports that the accused have tried to use their political connections and wads of cash to get the police to not take the case, two of the key suspects and two of the abettors have been arrested. What is discouraging is the compulsive show of wealth of individuals leading to reckless behaviour reinforced by the indulgence of guardians, that this case has revealed.

Of course, there is no foolproof formula for good parenting. There are no guarantees that despite all your efforts to be the best mother or the best father to your child, he/she will not turn out to be a monster. There are no guarantees, but there are at least some guidelines that are universal. When fathers engage in debauched lifestyles and parents pour their children with cash, expensive gadgets and cars without giving them any lessons on honesty, decency and respect for women, it gives their entitled sons the notion of invincibility. The seeds of delinquent behaviour are sown. Thus, while these young men who thought they were above the law, should be punished for their crimes, their parents are also culpable for not teaching their sons one of the basic rules of being civilised. That when a woman says no, regardless of what she is wearing or how late it is or whatever label she has been branded with, and they still force themselves on her—it is rape, a crime that deserves the harshest punishment under law.

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MAILBOX

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Can commuter trains be a viable alternative to road transport?

The article published last week about the viability of commuter trains in and around Dhaka city is really a timely article about the commuting problem for Dhaka city dwellers and for the people living adjacent to Dhaka city but working inside the city. Due to the shortage of sufficient buses and other vehicles, commuters of Dhaka city – especially women, children, and physically disabled people – suffer overcrowding in public transport. The most viable solution is an alternative commuting system such as train services which can solve the menace of so-called seating service buses and traffic jams. However, I want to recommend some other routes and places besides Joydebpur to Narayanganj. The government can consider establishing train routes from Paturia Ghat to Dhaka, Dohar Nawabganj to Dhaka, Munshiganj to Dhaka etc. If such places can be brought under the railway transportation system, there would be no need for flyovers or a metro rail system. This would benefit the above-mentioned commuters who would save time and money.

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The return of the Titans

Last week, I read the article titled "The Return of the Titans" which depicted the tremendous comeback of two superstars of the sports world of this era. I usually don't watch tennis but stay updated with the game. Though this article was about sports, it linked to a question of my own. Why are we as a country falling behind? In a developing country like Bangladesh, there is a lack of opportunities to establish our future as soon as possible after completing graduation from a demanding department or a reputed university. Most of the time, I have noticed that a person after 30 years of age doesn't have enough courage to boost their career by acquiring new skills. They just try to go forward with skills they have already learned. We can't assume our age to be a hindrance. We have to think about our country, the more we surge ahead the more our country will shine.

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PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

Lost to corruption

The article on the flash floods in the haors of Sunamganj was eye-opening as to the present circumstances of the flood-affected farmers and residents. It not only highlights the devastating consequences of natural disaster compounded by corruption affecting prevention measures such as embankments which were not built. The effects on the farmers who grow rice, the top food source in our country, with loss of their harvest and their livelihood for the year, are heartbreaking. Corrupt local government is exacerbating the plight of residents who have to line up, often fruitlessly, for subsidized rice being sold in these areas. More preventive long term measures to protect the haor people's livelihoods need to be introduced immediately in a transparent manner.

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The opinions expressed in these letters do not necessarily represent the views of the Star Weekend.

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