

SPOTLIGHT

A fearful existence

Ilius Hossain (not his real name), a student of the Department of Political Science, University of Dhaka, is a victim of Bangladesh Chhatra League's (BCL) reign of terror in Dhaka University. Beaten almost to death and thrown from the university's dormitory by BCL cadres, he could not attend his final exam. Ilius was tortured and handed over to the police just a day before his final exam for his alleged involvement with Jatiotabadi Chhatra Dal (BNP's student wing)—even though he was actually a member of the BCL.

"Their way of finding involvement with the opposition party is simple. Torture him so brutally that he will admit his involvement just to escape the pain. Several bones of my fingers got fractured, my nails were uprooted and I was hit countless times with steel rods and cricket bats. At one point, I became senseless and they poured cold water on

Lodging false charges against a person is one of the many ways that the BCL cadres bully their peers—a middle-order BCL dorm leader himself admitted to these tactics to *Star Weekend*. The intimidation goes like this: "At first, the person is questioned as to why he missed a political programme of Awami League or BCL. There are so many, it is actually easy to find one that the targeted student had not attended. If we find that the student missed it for any reason other than for an exam, then it is used as a legitimate excuse to torture the student. His room or bed is thoroughly searched for anything that can be used as evidence to incriminate him as a member of opposition parties like Bangladesh Islami Chhatra Shibir or Chhatra Dal. We also force him to show us his Facebook profile, his chat history, browsing history and friend list. If we get anything we can use as evidence, we torture him, break his limbs and then hand him over to the Shahbagh or Nilkhet police station."

The dorm leader admits that infighting between BCL members also



IMAGE: ORCHID CHANGMA

# FEAR

# A PART OF THE CURRICULUM

me. When I gained consciousness, they resumed the torture. They would have killed me for sure," he describes the horrifying ordeal.

"Just to save my life I admitted my involvement with Chhatra Dal, although I was never involved with that party. I was then handed over to the police. I had to spend a month in the hospital under police custody, and then another month in jail, until I got bail from the court."

According to Ilius, even the torturers knew that he was never involved with Chhatra Dal. His "crime" was that he once told off an influential member of the "president group" of BCL who was smoking weed in the balcony of the residential hall.

Ilius, who was also a BCL member of the dorm's "secretary group", requested him to go smoke up somewhere else—which that influential member did not appreciate. At that time, the dorm was considered to be under the "control" of the "secretary group" of the BCL, so the student of the "president group" could not do anything to Ilius. However, after a year, the "secretary group" lost control to the "president group". That was the chance he was waiting for. He hunted down Ilius, tortured him almost to death and threw him out of the dormitory. This is how a whole academic year of Ilius's life was wasted. He is yet to recover fully from the trauma of that horrific night.

creates a terrorising environment for common students. In every dormitory, there are two groups of BCL: one which is loyal to the president of the BCL committee for that dormitory, and another which follows the secretary. A feud between the president and secretary of the BCL of Mohsin Hall turned deadly in 2011 when 70 students were severely injured. The two groups used firearms, steel rods, sharp weapons, and hurled at least 10 crude bombs at each other during the clash.

How students turn into gangsters

The Bangladesh Chhatra League members mostly enter educational institutes as normal teenagers with dreams of a college degree and a future. A strict hazing process that begins at the dormitory gates turn them into the rod-wielding, gun-toting political bullies that people have come to know and fear. "Students are indoctrinated into a culture of violence from the very first year. All students have to register with a residential hall and before their first day is over, the dormitory leaders approach them for recruitment," says a student of Marketing.

"For example when I came in, I was called in the middle of the night to go beat up a guy or get beaten up myself. Turns out the person we assaulted was

ZYMA ISLAM AND MD SHAHNAWAZ KHAN CHANDAN

seen hanging out with a BCL leader's girlfriend," he adds. "If the tasks are not completed, students lose their dormitory seats."

A former League follower from Chittagong, currently living in Dhaka, also agrees that the "beat up or get beaten up" tactic is used to entrap students.

"Every task set out by the BCL leaders, and every punishment meted out by them involves violence. So, when I became a BCL leader, I knew that I had a lot of enemies who were waiting for the slightest chance to gang up on me and beat me. I had to be on the defensive all the time, so I became very good at assaulting too," he describes.

When he says he has to be on the defensive at all times, he is not kidding. The ex-Leaguer was performing with his band at a club located in a neighbourhood which was "controlled" by a rival BCL faction, when the rivals decided to attack him. "I was on-stage

and suddenly saw them in the crowd. I knew they were here to beat me up, so I slipped out of the venue and called for back-up," he describes. A fight ensued. We asked him: what does it mean to have an area under a faction's control? "It means that the members of the rival gang cannot enter the area. If a campus is controlled by one group then the rivals can only come for classes, but cannot hang out and about," he says. The arbitrary dominance that the BCL have spent in the last decade fighting for, is reminiscent of how animal packs mark out territories, either recruiting or attacking any stray mutt that wanders in.

This campus dominance means that the daily lives of all students are besieged by these political bullies, making fear an integral and accepted part of the educational experience in Dhaka University.

Last week *Star Weekend* arranged focus group discussions where respondents opened up anonymously

about their daily experiences with BCL. The conclusion was this—there should not only be protests when BCL stabs and kills, but also about the day-to-day impunity they enjoy.

Over the last three or so decades, any and every ruling party has let their student bodies run amok in the educational campus and for sure; BCL is hardly any different. That the cadres will bully, hunt, assault and haze students has become an accepted fact over the last eight years, but the respondents of the focus group discussions believe that people should stop accepting this as normal.

Sexual harassment as a tool

A group of students took to the streets on January 23 and pointed out that this is not acceptable, and got assaulted for it—the news of the resultant clashes was splashed across the front page of every newspaper. Here is why they were protesting: on January 14, students were staging sit-ins demanding that Dhaka University sever ties with its seven-affiliated colleges, when BCL men suddenly swooped upon them.

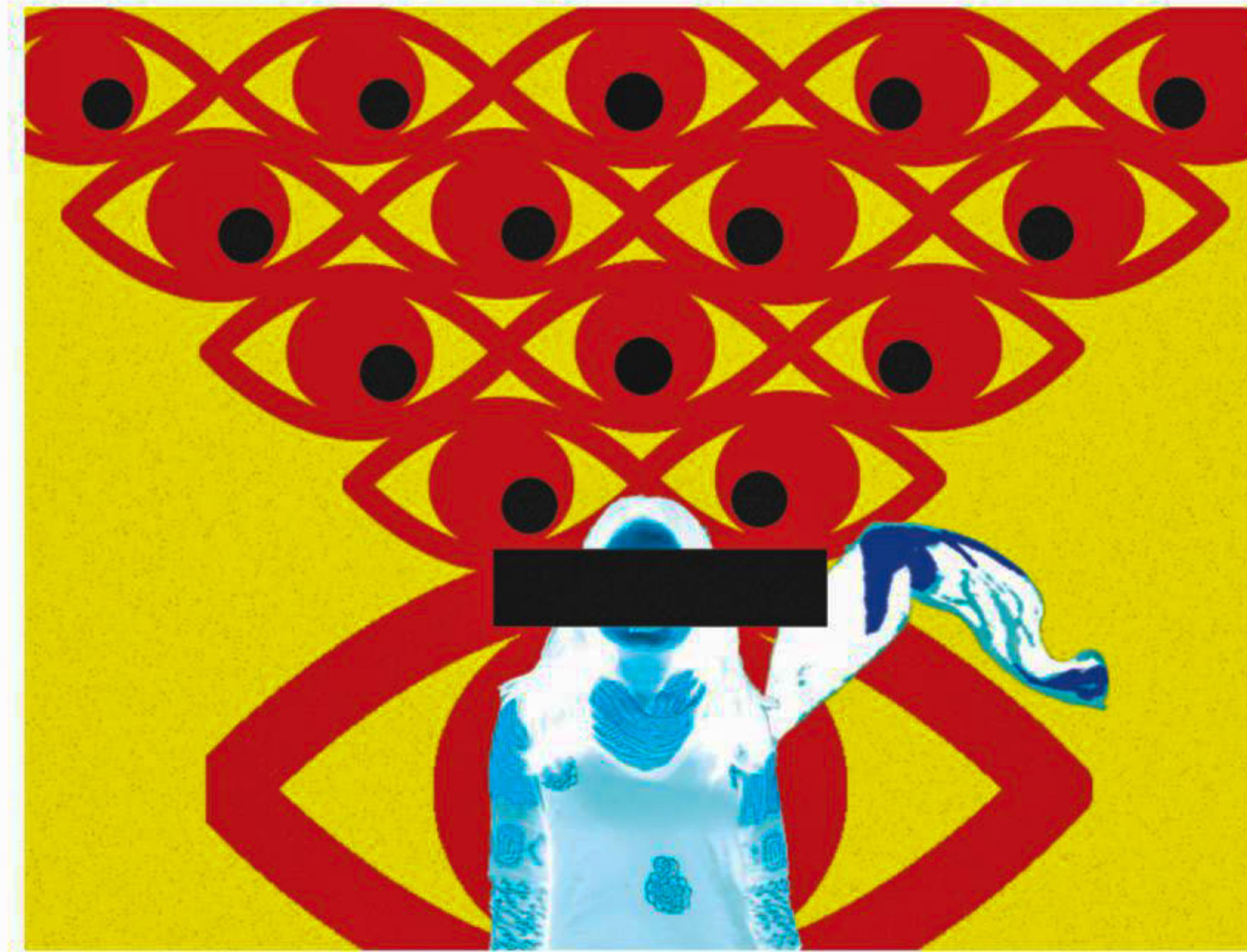


IMAGE: ORCHID CHANGMA

"They came over to the girls and said things like 'since you are sitting out on the streets already, come to our rooms with us'," says Shrobona Shafique Dipti, one of the students present at many of the multiple back-to-back protests that happened over the last few weeks. "They blew cigarette smoke in the faces of girls and questioned their character for coming out to protest. That is why we organised a protest again on January 23 to demand justice for sexual harassment."

The protesters marched onto the Vice-Chancellor's office only to find locked gates. The crowd broke open the padlock and rushed inside to encircle the university's premier, and it was at that point again that the BCL cadres attacked them. But now, they were armed with iron rods. Photos of Dipti getting mauled by Srabony Shaila, the BCL general secretary of Kuwait Maitree Hall, went viral last week.

Whatever happened on January 23 drives home the point that students had to organise a protest to demand justice for something as black and white as sexual harassment by BCL—and simultaneously have that protest be attacked by them too.

Sexual harassment is one of the most common allegations against BCL men—and one of the main tools they use to exert their influence.

"A BCL man used to call me night after night from different numbers. He would send threatening texts saying that he is watching every move of mine. My friends started avoiding me and I stopped hanging out on campus after that," says a female respondent majoring in World Religions and Culture at one of the *Star Weekend* focus group discussions.

"A friend of mine who lived in Mirpur used to get on a bus in front of Curzon Hall. This BCL man used to stalk her but she refused all his advances. Then he got a Facebook friend of hers to download all her photos and open a fake account. Each time she reported it and got it closed down, he opened another one. He

What do the authorities do?

There is a cell in Dhaka University dedicated to cases of sexual harassment but the students interviewed did not know about it, or did not feel that they could lodge complaints about the politically powerful.

All respondents noted that the authorities side with the BCL in most cases.



IMAGE: ORCHID CHANGMA

"We were having a debating club event in our residential hall when the BCL officers of our hall barged in and demanded to know why they were not invited. They were not members of the debate club," says a student majoring in law. "The dorm tutor came in to handle the situation and gave them all the food we arranged for our event, to pacify them."

"Our dorm tutors, hall provosts need to be on our side, or else we cannot get justice," she adds. Last year, the residents of Rokeya Hall protested against the biased stance of the hall authorities. "BCL cadres were renting out rooms to outsiders who were not even students of Dhaka University. One of them used to go out every day wearing a school uniform! But the authorities refused to believe us, so we protested," says a respondent.

"This first-year girl in our residential hall refused to go to the BCL-sponsored rally so they influenced the hall provost into delaying the issuing of her pay-slip. For first years who are yet to get ID cards, the pay-slip is the only proof of identity on campus. Without it, she is at risk of getting kicked out of her hall anytime," describes a resident of Rokeya Hall. Students have to attend all political rallies by the ruling parties or risk angering the BCL. Last month, the BCL unit of a hall in Bangladesh Agricultural University kicked out a student for refusing to go to a political programme. She camped out in front of her dormitory in protest, and a photo of that went viral across social media.

Patronising violence?

A student of the business school describes how a classmate of his shot dead another student and was initially expelled from the university, but brought back in again by the respective department head. "He attended all classes and gave all his exams, after having shot dead a student," he adds. That the authorities are careful around

BCL can be seen from the fact that they are yet to publicly address the serious allegation of sexual harassment made by the protesters of January 14 (the ones demanding separation of the DU-affiliated colleges).

On Sunday last week, the Dhaka University Teachers' Association stood in a human chain in front of the Aparajeyo Bangla monument decrying the fact that the students protesting against sexual harassment at their sit-in had encircled the VC's office. The president of the teachers' association, Professor Dr Maksud Kamal, was quoted in *The Daily Star* last week as having said this about the protesters: "Leaders and activists of different political parties participated in the demonstration. It was part of a conspiracy" and "... They want to remove the pro-liberation forces from power." When asked by journalists to comment on the BCL's role in the entire hullabaloo, Kamal's answer was more measured—he said that the authorities are investigating what BCL's role truly was.

Petty but dangerous is what can be used to describe the culture of fear in Dhaka University. Due to BCL's reign of terror and Dhaka University authority's blind eye towards their terrorist activities, the very essence of the oldest and most prominent university of Bangladesh has come into question. What was supposed to be the breeding ground of scholarship and democratic leadership has become a hostage to the exploitative politics of the ruling parties. ■