



ILLUSTRATION: KAZI-TAHSEN AGAZ APURBO

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On the night of December 31, a day after the election, a mother of four was gang-raped in Subarnachar upazila of Noakhali. The rape is widely being acknowledged as election violence.

Except the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) does not agree. Last week, it investigated the Subarnachar rape incident and concluded that it could not find any link between the incident and the elections.

"We found primary evidence that Parul Begum was raped and severely injured using blunt force, but we could not establish any link between the rape and

Was the Subarnachar rape linked to the election?

the 11th national parliamentary elections," states the investigation report published by the NHRC on January 8.

NHRC spoke to the survivor—and as per the transcript of the interview included in its report, she clearly mentioned the name of at least one of her rapists—Sohel—as being present at the voting centre. Parul stated during her interview to the human rights body: "I told the men that I will vote for who I want, and they said, 'Leave now, you will be put in your place in the evening.' Then Soheli said, 'See you tonight.'"

"We were in bed. Around 12:30am there was loud banging on the door and when we wanted to know who it was this late at night, they said they were from the police station. I opened the door and around ten people came in. I asked Soheli bhai why he was trying to break down the walls of my house this late at night," the survivor told the NHRC.

Afterwards, Parul's husband, children and pet dog were tied up, while she was gang-raped by Soheli and others in her courtyard.

"That the NHRC said this is very disappointing. The survivor too is a witness and her testimony should be taken into account," eminent human rights lawyer Salma Ali told this correspondent. Ali had personally met with the survivor to take her testimony.

"This rape was not caused by prior enmity—and even if there is prior enmity it does not matter. The incident happened the very night of election day and was perpetrated by people who were present at the polling centre."

The NHRC's conclusion also overlooked the fact that Ruhul Amin, the person booked as the perpetrator who ordered the rape, was, in fact, a polling agent inside the voting centre where

Parul went to cast her vote. Amin is a former Union Parishad member.

Very interestingly, the reason why NHRC overlooked this very important link is based on a mere technicality: apparently neither Parul nor her husband mentioned to the NHRC that the alleged rapists belonged to the ruling party.

As they say in their report, "In her testimonial to the investigation committee, Parul Begum did not mention anything about the rapists being members or polling agents of the party in opposition to *dhaner shish*." The report further goes on to claim that her husband did not tell

the NHRC either.

This logic also does not acknowledge that on January 6, 2019, Ruhul Amin was expelled from the Awami League for his involvement with the rape.

"Ruhul Amin was a polling agent at my voting centre," said Mohammed Faizullah, the presiding officer of Madhya Bagga Primary School, when called by this correspondent. "I saw him sitting in a room, asked him who he is, and he said he is a polling agent. So, I took his signature and registered him as one."

Star Weekend spoke to many of the assistant presiding officers of that voting centre, and they claimed that Ruhul Amin was in continuous interaction with voters. "He sat in all the rooms. He seemed to be supervising all the agents and giving them orders to do things," said three of the assistant presiding officers. "The school is open and has no gates and the voters were lined up in front of the polling booths so whoever wants can interact with them," another explained.

"It was a one-sided vote in my polling booth.

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