

# A victim no more

*Purnima Shil wants to change not only her own life, but those of other survivors as an MP*

NILIMA JAHAN

Do you remember the 13-year-old girl from Ullahpara, Sirajganj, who was gang-raped by members of the then ruling party after the 2001 election? Do you remember her portrait that was published in almost all newspapers, where she was hiding her face in her hands? Or that title 'Aami ekhon mukh dekhabo ki kore (how will I show my face to society now)?'

18 years down, that girl has made headlines again. But this time, she is not hiding her face. Purnima Shil recently bought and submitted the Awami League (AL) nomination form, with the hope of being nominated as an MP from the seats reserved for women.

Purnima says she wants to stand up for survivors like herself, and aid them in their long and often impossible pursuit of justice. "I've known first-hand what stigma and the struggle for justice is like—and how it can almost break you," she says. "Maybe I can use this experience to do something positive for others."

According to Purnima, on October 1, 2001, the day of the ninth parliamentary election, she along with her friends went to Purbo Delua High School in Ullahpara to their private tutor. They were young enough that they didn't know that the teacher was a polling agent (of Awami League) and working that day. On seeing them, he told them to sit in the polling room while he left for a bit. "We waited there for so long but he didn't come back. By this time, people coming in to vote thought we were polling agents of AL," says Purnima.

A week after the incident, on the evening of October 8, she says around 60-80 people came to their house and started beating up Purnima and her family members. At one point, they took her to a nearby crematorium. The neighbours were standing on the streets with kerosene lamps, but nobody came forward to save her. "They pinched me, took away my clothes and tied my face with a *gamcha*. I knew their voice; I could see their face in the light of their torch. Then, two of them took me to a nearby

empty field and raped me one after another until I lost my consciousness," she recalls.

After 10 years of filing the rape case, the High Court finally sentenced 11 people to life imprisonment and fined them one lakh taka each in 2011. However, only two of the accused are in jail, while the rest are out on bail. Purnima hasn't received a single taka as of yet.

"If in such a high-profile case as mine, the accused gets bail, then maybe I *should* cover my face for a lifetime," rants a frustrated Purnima.

Her life changed drastically, she says, after that incident. 13-year-old Purnima barely knew the meaning of the word 'rape' at the time. Not only did she have to cope with the trauma of the actual violence but also with the witch-hunting and stigmatisation that followed. She had to leave her village, never to return again.



"I remember my family started living in a shanty at Shamolipara of Ullahpara, as everyone was unwilling as well as scared to rent us a room. And 18 years ago, my father had to spend Tk 1,500, from his



ILLUSTRATION: NAHFIA JAHAN MONNI

small barber shop, for such a house, in addition to maintaining our family, of 11," recalls Purnima.

"My family members and I couldn't get out of our house, because, thanks to the newspapers who care more about stories than survivors, everyone knew my name, face, and my parents. We got no sympathy from society. A few days later, veteran journalist Wahidul Haque and Shahriar Kabir Sir of Nirmul Committee took me to Dhaka to give me protection, but I still had to face harassment at every step in my life, as if I was responsible for my accident," she says.

"Although, usually, Hindu women don't wear *burqah*, I had to cover myself in order to attend my SSC exam at the village. But that too didn't make any difference. My friends, as well as strangers, would come to me and go like, 'Ooo, you are that Purnima, how many people raped you?' or 'How did they rape you?' or 'You should stay at home, why are you coming out?'"

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