

RAPE OF AN INDIGENOUS SCHOOLGIRL

Why did the Khagrachhari school reinstate a known sexual predator?



NO STRINGS ATTACHED

Aasha Mehreen Amin is joint editor at The Daily Star.

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

The rape of an Indigenous schoolgirl in Khagrachhari allegedly by a teacher, who was beaten to death by members of Indigenous communities, sparked another wave of violence and confrontation between Paharis and Bangalees. The clashes are a sequel to the incidents that happened two weeks ago when a Bangalee in Khagrachhari was killed by a mob on suspicion of stealing a motorcycle. The individuals who killed him were all Bangalees. But a rumour started spreading that the murder was carried out by Paharis resulting in a spree of arson attacks and vandalism of Indigenous people's homes and shops, and the killing of at least four Indigenous people in Rangamati and Khagrachhari.

But let us come back to the sexual assault of a female school student allegedly by a teacher who had a track record of abusing students. According to news reports, Abul Hasnat Muhammad Sohail Rana, the teacher, had been arrested in a case of attempted rape of a 10th-grader in February 2021. After his release, he returned to work at the same school despite protests from other students. Earlier in 2018, a Kushtia school's investigation found that Rana had sexually harassed several students, according to local media reports.

Why did the authorities of the Khagrachhari school reinstate someone who not only had a sexual assault allegation on record in the same school, but had been transferred from the Kushtia school where similar allegations had been raised against

him? What kind of influence did he have to secure transfers and reappointments after being known for his predatory behaviour?

The obvious conclusion one can come up with is that the school authorities simply did not care about the safety of its female students, many of whom are from Indigenous communities. They did not care even when students protested Sohail Rana's return after he got out of jail. The most logical action by any school authorities would have been an outright dismissal.

There have been numerous incidents of female students being sexually assaulted, harassed, and even raped by teachers all over the country. Only in the case of some much-publicised cases has justice been served. But this particular incident has a racial dimension to it and exposes the added vulnerability of young women and girls when they belong to Indigenous communities.

Sexual violence that includes abduction and rape of Indigenous women and girls by non-Indigenous perpetrators is a well-known, under-reported "secret." A report published by Kapaeng Foundation in 2018 estimates 56 Indigenous women being sexually or physically assaulted in the previous year by 75 alleged perpetrators, most of them non-Indigenous. Fear of repercussion, lack of access to legal justice, and a discriminatory attitude of the administration make sure that the silence is not broken. As a result, most incidents do not get reported in the media and very little data exists on this issue.



VISUAL: TUFAN CHAKMA

In the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) region, sexual violence against women and girls is often weaponised to further marginalise Indigenous communities and grab their lands. In January 2018, during a joint raid in a village in Rangamati, security forces allegedly attacked two Marma teenage sisters, raping one of them and sexually assaulting the other. The two sisters were admitted to the hospital and kept under strict surveillance. On February 15, 2018, members of security forces took the sisters out of the hospital in the name of handing them over to their parents. When Rani Yan Yan, adviser to the Chakma Raja who had been looking after the sisters along with her volunteers, tried to stop them, she was physically attacked.

Thus, the fact that a teacher with a track record of abuse enjoyed the impunity of returning to his profession and repeating the same crime is part of the general allowances accorded to criminals when the victims are Indigenous, and the perpetrators are non-Indigenous or connected to the state machinery. That the rape of a school student led to the death of the accused teacher at the hands of Indigenous people reveals the level of hostility between the two sides. It goes without saying, however, that power is tilted heavily on the non-Indigenous, majoritarian side.

These incidents are a consequence of the non-implementation of the CHT Accord of 1997, which promised to protect and ensure the rights of the Indigenous people of the region, including the right to their own land and the right to live as equal citizens of the country. Until the accord is fully adopted, the interim government's task is to protect the Indigenous communities, especially their female members, with full cooperation of the security forces and administration. Those responsible for the violence and attacks on the Indigenous communities must be caught and meted out justice, regardless of who they are.

EDUCATION, IDENTITY AND IDEOLOG

Bangladesh's struggle for unity



BLOWN' IN THE WIND

Dr Shamsad Mortuza is professor of English at Dhaka University.

SHAMSAD MORTUZA

Years of neglect and underinvestment in education have conditioned the societal meltdown that we are experiencing today. Unplanned growth of alternative educational systems, such as madrasa, happened in an effort to fill the void left by public institutions. This, among other things, contributed to societal fragmentation even as it fostered the promotion of divergent ideological perspectives. In a way, the three-pronged education—Bangla, English, and madrasa—does our youth a disservice, as evidenced by the social, cultural, economic and political battles we are seeing.

The fight against the former regime began over a discriminatory percentage of job allocation. Students from all three groups came together, shouldered with the common mass, sacrificed their lives, and stood in solidarity seeking a systemic reform. Now that the regime change has happened, harsh realities are hitting the surface. Imagine: nearly 19 lakh graduates who completed their education in the last three years are unable to find jobs. While the situation exposes the gap between our education system and industry, it also calls for a review of the system that failed to prepare our graduates for a competitive job market. A recent attempt to reform the curriculum encountered difficulties when the commission formed to oversee the changes came under scrutiny for their ideological beliefs. The government disbanded the commission as some members were accused of supporting secularism and endorsing personal freedoms by some hardline religious elements. It signals an emerging ideological clash, which may hamper the reform process. For the incumbent government, problems run like a motorcycle in a circus iron cage. As members in the crowd, we see movement and hear noises, but nothing seems to change.

But the incident highlighted the gap between our secular education system and the growing influence of religious elements. Mahfuj Alam, the young special assistant to the chief adviser, recently spoke to *Prothom Alo*, where he claimed that the visible Islamic resurgence in Bangladesh's culture and politics is not an isolated event—it is part of a deeper, unresolved ideological struggle that dates back to the 1947 Partition. Leaders

have historically used both religion and Bangalee nationalism to serve various political purposes, creating a complex interplay between identity and power. The push for a homeland for Bangalee Muslims during the Partition proved to be short-lived, as it became clear that our cultural identity was fundamentally different from those in Pakistan. Following the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, the focus shifted towards language and



VISUAL: SHAIKH SULTANA JAHAN BADDON

ethnicity, with secularism, nationalism, socialism and democracy becoming the guiding principles of the new nation.

Yet, for many who fought in the war from an existential perspective, these principles left unresolved questions about the role of religion for a Bangalee Muslim. Mahfuj points out that this ideological split allowed various groups to politicise religion in ways that continue to divide the nation today. The inability to engage the masses in a unified educational framework has fuelled resentment and created fertile ground for alternative institutions to thrive.

Referring to a question on the rise of Islamists, Mahfuj characterised it as a return of the repressed. "Resentment can make people become reactionary," he said. "A large part of our ruling class had

a secular identity, but they were never in a secular structure. How does a poor boy grow up in society? The state does not feed him; the orphanage does."

According to Mahfuj, the ruling class ignored the vast majority in the villages. "There has not been any dialogue with this large group." No one ever discussed the cherry-picking of Hason Raja or Lalou without properly understanding how these societal figures came to such a humanitarian understanding. People portrayed them as stately figures without understanding their societal evolution.

"The villagers perceive Dhaka as the state. They know that no one will give them anything. They made their own arrangements. They have created their own political culture. If someone goes there wearing modern clothes, they become a victim of suspicion and hatred. Because the villager's boundaries are set,

"ideological trap" was created in 1972 that did not answer the questions of 1947 and oversimplified secularism to overshadow the question of the Bangalee Muslim identity. This allowed many disenfranchised groups to politicise Islam. The riots in 1950 disrupted the unity among the subalterns, who included lower-caste Hindus and Muslims in 1947. When a nationalist notion subsumed the religious category in 1971, it further troubled the coexistence of Hindus and Muslims. Mahfuj sees the 2024 mass uprising as a redress for many of these unresolved issues, both cultural and ideological. To ensure equity and dignity for all, including the religious and ethnic minorities, the ongoing reformation must address these surface and deep structures.

Mahfuj reflects on the systemic oppression or regression that has created

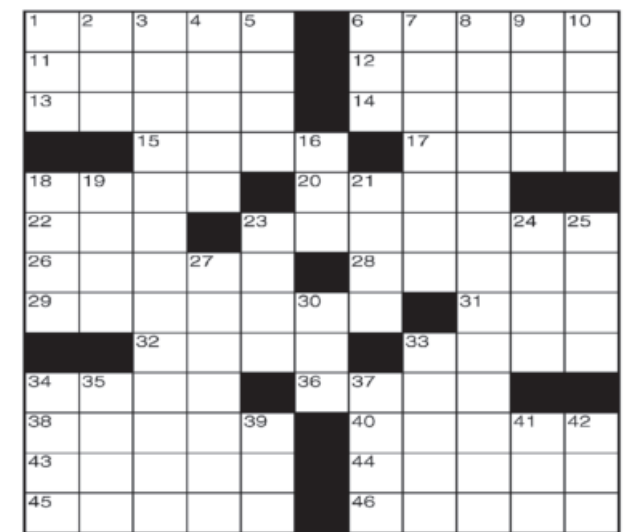
CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Back biter
- 6 Gem unit
- 11 Find darling
- 12 Unescorted
- 13 Quick kisses
- 14 Summit goals
- 15 Young foxes
- 17 Revue segment
- 18 Chef's need
- 20 Long snouted fish
- 22 Make fun of
- 23 Holiday events
- 26 Stylishly quaint
- 28 Prelude
- 29 Sticks
- 31 Owns
- 32 Puts away
- 33 Mexican coin
- 34 Bounders
- 36 Thick slice
- 38 Distant
- 40 African lilies
- 43 Cherry center
- 44 Pageant crown
- 45 Neigh sayer
- 46 Ledger item

DOWN

- 1 Travel aid
- 2 Poem of praise
- 3 Prevented intruders, in a way
- 4 Alan of "Argo"
- 5 Breather
- 6 Upper limit
- 7 Nome native
- 8 Caused trouble
- 9 Against
- 10 Midterm, for one
- 16 Relaxing retreat
- 18 Gumbo base
- 19 Competed
- 21 Eye part
- 23 Cruise stop
- 24 Important times
- 25 Mediocre
- 27 Grounds
- 30 Slalom maneuver
- 33 Michael of Monty Python
- 34 Moolah
- 35 Choir voice
- 37 Past due
- 39 Clinic cost
- 41 Go wrong
- 42 Utter



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TUESDAY'S ANSWERS



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