

Gang-rape of landless member for exercising her right to vote

Organisation mobilises for support and protests for ensuring justice



Landless members and general people at assembly protesting the gang-rape of Parul.

On the night after the 11th National Elections in Bangladesh, around 10-12 men cut the fences and entered the house of Parul Akhter of Subarnachar in Noakhali. The men tied up Parul's husband and children and dragged her outside, where she was assaulted and gang-raped. In an election which witnessed widespread incidents of irregularities including compulsion to vote for the nominee from the ruling party, Parul had dared disregard the threats of a party cadre and vote for the candidate of her choice a day before. When the news of this spread through the national media, the uproar was tremendous. The police and administration were bound to act, and arrests were made. Even then, there were attempts to shield the main accused and even to establish that the election had no link with the crime. The landless organization, of which Parul is a member, also mobilized. The combined effect of national outrage and local mobilization has yielded some results in the form of administrative action, but given similar incidents of subsequent gang rapes due to similar motives, a significant new dimension might be emerging—a result of the existing sense of impunity—in terms of tackling sexual violence and violence against women.

Parul Akhter, aged 36, is a member of the landless organisation of Madhyam Charbagya in Subarnachar, Noakhali. On the day of the election on December 30, 2018, she had gone to designated polling centre. As an outspoken woman who believes in the ideals of democracy and political freedom, she was adamant in exercising her right to vote. At the voting center Ruhul Amin, publicity affairs secretary of the Subarnachar Awami League and a former member of Char Jubilee Union Parishad—who was working as a polling agent at the booths—and his associates stopped her and insisted that she vote for “boat”, the electoral symbol of the Awami League. When she retorted that she would cast her vote for the candidate of her choice, he tried to snatch the ballot paper from her. But Parul had already marked the “sheaf of paddy”, the symbol of the opposition BNP party, and put it inside the ballot box. In a later interview with the National Human

Right Commission (NHRC), Parul said: "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 Sohel said, 'See you tonight.'" Sohel was one of the men Parul later recognized as one of her rapists.

The night after the election, on December 31 around 12:30 am, when Parul and her family consisting of her husband and four children had finished eating and gone to bed, they heard loud banging on their door. Voices outside claimed that they belonged to people from the police station. As she opened the door, 10-12 people rushed in, among them Sohel, who had made the threat a day earlier. She was dragged outside and gang-raped. The men also took away Tk 40,000, some gold ornaments and other valuables with them. Parul's husband managed some time later to take the bleeding Parul to the hospital.

Incidents of voter intimidation and other election-time irregularities such as ballot stuffing, preventing opposition participation, and even violence at polling centres are not new phenomenon in the context of Bangladesh irrespective of the party in power. In the days after the election news reports of various irregularities surfaced from all over the country. The climate of the voting centre where Parul had cast her vote can also be judged from news reports later which highlighted how Ruhul Amin had been going around supervising voters and agents throughout the day. An assistant presiding officer, seeking anonymity, told a journalist that "polling agents did not let the voters go behind the curtain to cast their vote—and whoever was voting for any party but the ruling party was being made to vote on 'boat' on another ballot." (Star Weekend, *The Daily Star*, January 18, 2019). But, despite the almost normalization of electoral irregularities and violence, what happened in the case of Parul certainly marked a new dimension of politically-motivated violence.

As the news of what had happened spread through the national media, on January 6, 2019, Ruhul Amin was expelled from the Awami League. However, a NHRC team sent to investigate the matter, after concluding its investigation, claimed that the victim's allegation of being raped for voting for BNP was not true—it apparently failed to establish any connection between the elections and the crime. This echoed the statement of Elias Sharif, the superintendent of police in Noakhali, who while confirming that the rape did happen, claimed that it was not related to voting. Even the Divisional Commissioner, on 8 January, tried to link the rape to some "previous enmity. The name of the main accused, Ruhul Amin, was dropped from the charge sheet at one point. There were clearly some efforts to delink the case from its political context and to shield the party member.

Alongside this national condemnation, the landless organisation too took up the matter. Standing by Parul, the organization immediately called an emergency meeting when it learned of what had happened. They visited Parul in the hospital, and started to exert pressure to ensure that the case was taken by the police when her husband went to file it. The organization also submitted a memorandum to the district commissioner and the police super after mass signature collection demanding justice. Protest marches were organised in all working areas immediately, and it was decided that a big assembly would be organised on January 7, 2019 in Subarnachar.

On the day of the assembly, people from all working areas joined in at the assembly at Pankhar Bazar High School field. The Subarnachar upazila committee chairman Sejarul Haque Khokon chaired the assembly, and alongside the members, journalists, local students and teachers, Nijera Kori's coordinator Khushi Kabir, National Women's Lawyers Association's Salma Ali, and Mahmudul Hasan, an activist against sexual violence were also present.

During the assembly, members spoke out decrying the gang-rape and demanding justice for Parul. An 80-year-old man, father of one of the accused in the rape, came up on stage, and demanded punishment for his son's actions: "My son is a rapist. I want him tried and hanged. I don't care whether he is hanged or he goes to hell."



The father of one the accused in Parul's gang-rape speaks at the assembly organised by the landless organisation in Pankhar Bazar on 7 January demanding punishment of all the rapists.

Khushi Kabir met with the local DC and SP to further advocate for proper investigation and justice. After the assembly, the people marched out in procession from the school field, through the area.

After the incident, police have arrested many of the accused including Ruhul Amin. The government has allocated a plot of khas land for Parul, and has been more cooperative in helping her pursue justice. The NHRC's initial report which tried to claim that the rape had no connection with the events of the election day was met country-wide with

condemnation. The headmaster of Pankhar Bazar school made assurances that Parul's children would be guaranteed free education. Two lawyers have been engaged for her, who are currently closely following the investigation. At the same time, there have been attempts to pressure Parul to settle the case out of court, which she, with the support of the landless organization has refused to yield to.

While the widespread national publicity and condemnation and local level mobilization of the landless organisation has been able to achieve some immediate results so that the law enforcement and administration have been compelled to act, the incident has wider repercussions. It clearly marks a new dimension: that of open use of rape as a political weapon. Soon afterwards, more such cases were reported in the media, including that of a 48-year-old woman who was gang-raped on March 31 evening in Char Jabbar in Noakhalia because she had "campaigned for an upazila vice chairman candidate" in the Upazila polls.

And while even in that case arrests have been made, the political and social climate where such incidents are increasing is concerning—that the rapists in the second case were so sure of impunity, political or otherwise, even after the first case was gaining such widespread condemnation. These wider cultural, political, governance and justice system factors need to be critically examined—alongside mobilization to ensure justice, addressing those is crucial.