

Rape Culture and the Culturally Raped in Bangladesh

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The crime of rape is not new to our world. In very many cases, men are perpetrators and women are victims of rape. Violence and abuse against women in the form of rape is a common weapon used by men to enforce control, humiliate their victims, and also get perverted sexual pleasure. But beyond that, rape can be a form of humiliation and shame that tends to and is intended to cling to victims and to what victims represent. Hence, rape signifies the shaming of an individual but also sometimes of the family, or group, or community, or even nation, to which the individual belongs. This is one crime where victims and those associated with them can be disgraced and shamed by the crime committed not *by* but *to* them.

Rape is not a new phenomenon in my homeland of Bangladesh either. What I find new are some of the *politico-religious, psychological and cultural motivations* behind rape. The increasing number of rapes in Bangladesh has, I believe, an intimate connection with the cultural changes the country is undergoing. While ‘culture’ itself happens to be a fluid term, referring to something ever subject to change and adaptation, I feel what Bangladesh is going through right at this moment is a state of cultural confusion. This confusion stems from the uneasy mix of westernization, on the one hand, and solidifying religious understandings and practices on the other. The two are in conflict with each other, as well as with the complex roots of the geo-political and historico-cultural entity that is [Bengal](#). The Bengali people take pride in these roots. These roots bring strength, identity and unity and made it possible for Bangladesh to emerge as a sovereign and independent state. But the current generation, I find, is caught up in a cultural maelstrom that has manifested in a variety of ways, including in the number and character of rapes in Bangladesh.

In this piece, I do not take ‘rape’ to refer only to forced penetrative sexual intercourse, where one participant is not consenting. I take any kind of sexual harassment, violence, aggression, approach, both verbal and physical, to be rape-culture-supportive, or to constitute potential rape. Not only rape itself, but potential rape, too, wreak great harm and should not be ignored.

I develop my discussion in seven stages:

- I will begin **(1)** with describing how the act of rape and the victim of rape are seen in Bangladeshi society, which reflects also the reality in Bengal and, to some extent, the sub-continent of India. It is important to understand the social perspectives and context, as this has much to contribute to understanding why rape happens in the first place. My discussion includes how perpetrators capitalise on cultural attitudes and stereotypes of rape. This first section, therefore, begins to delineate what *rape culture* means in the context of Bangladesh.
- In the second part **(2)**, I will take a brief glimpse at the history, or, to use the term I prefer, the *becoming*, of Bangladesh. On its political journey to independence our land witnessed mass rape. This, moreover, was not very long ago. I have mentioned politico-religious motives of rape in present times: to explain these, it is necessary to look to the recent past. The politically invested and religiously motivated large-scale violence targeted above all at women and girls at the time of the nation's birth, are still resonant and contribute to gender-based violence now. I will also refer to the protests *against* such incidences nowadays and to the arguments against justifications of such acts made by feminists, intellectuals and human rights activists, as well as by the conscious general masses. This is so that the other side of the picture, the picture of resistance against the malice of rape and sexual abuse, is not ignored. I believe this will also shed some light on the **ideological conflict zone** of today's Bangladesh. Woven into this is religion: in this case, primarily Islam,¹ and Islamic conservatism.
- Islamic conservatism is growing in Bangladesh. I will address religiously conservative preaching and propagation in Bangladesh **(3)**: more particularly, its highly objectionable language concerning women, especially the language targeting women who are educated, perceived as careerist and progressive in thought, and as not shy to express their opinions. I will discuss how conservative sermons toy with and prey on the religious sentiments of audiences, openly and deliberately exhibiting disdain for women, which, in turn, I believe, influences listeners and legitimates hostility to women and, occasionally, too, sexually abusive conduct towards women.

- The next part of my discussion (4) will be about the new *attacking attention* and sexual abuse that women in Bangladesh are facing on public transport and in other public places. I will bring in some specific examples of these abuses. These attacks are not always aimed at *rape*, but are violent or virtual, physical or verbal types of harassment and abuse. While the voices speaking out *against* such abuse are getting louder, it remains difficult for women to live their lives safely and on their own terms.
- Class also has bearing on the gender and rape issues discussed here (5). My next part of the discussion is about the value systems of different classes and how these affect attitudes towards women, both within the same class and between classes. In my assessment, such attitudes are conductors for sexual violence and assault. Stirred in with this are also religious sensitivities and cultural prejudices, some of which are in conflict with ideas of westernization or adaptations to westernization.
- Other factors contributing to aggression against women come from the entertainment sector (drama, movies, soap operas and other broadcasts on television and the internet) (6). There are a few significant aspects to be taken into account:
 - The presentation and representation of rape and rape victims in mainstream cinema
 - The minimal representation of rape and sexual abuse in television drama
 - The nearly absent representation of working and career women in popular television media programmes, in both cinema and drama
 - The misrepresentation of career women in popular television media programmes
 - The objectification of the female body
 - The uncritical acceptance and celebration of the representation of women in Bollywood films.

I will be giving a snapshot of these aspects and then point out what impact these have on Bangladeshi society, including the repercussions for audiences from different classes. Class, both economic and social, is, I argue, a pertinent factor not to be ignored here. Many of the programmes are produced with a specific audience in mind, meaning that they contain materials corresponding to the expectations of this target audience.

- Lastly, I will discuss the impact on viewers of exposure to porn sites (7). The nature and characteristics of sexual attacks on women in present times have forced me to direct my thoughts to this particular topic. The resemblances between acts of sexual violence and depictions in pornographic productions are striking and shocking.

Rape is, I argue, an exhibition of sexual perversion by the one who commits it. But rape, like the other forms of sexual violence against women in Bangladesh (as in other parts of the world too, no doubt), is more than physical and psychological abuse of an individual (though it certainly is that). As I have mentioned already, there is the tendency of harming a woman and her reputation in a way that disgraces her socially. Moreover, this also has repercussions for the victim's family or community. Furthermore, there is also the underlying 'manifesto' of 'teaching women a lesson' for their 'misconducts' (that is, in terms of both religious and culturally conservative standards) and showing women collectively their 'right' place in family and society. This place is one that conforms to stereotyped gender roles: performing household chores, child-rearing and obeying decisions made for them by men. At the very least, women are to accept being second in place to the men in their household and in wider society (i.e. to agree that men are superior to women). The 'misconducts' meanwhile, are most often derived from ideas designated 'Western' and 'modern', such as those pertaining to originality and individuality, which are deemed contrary to the cultures and traditions of Muslim-majority countries, like Bangladesh.

1. Bangladeshi society and rape

I should mention first that since rape, or sexual assault, is generally in our social perception considered to bring grave disgrace, rape survivors tend to keep their experiences private and to themselves. Their families, too, often prefer not to make rape incidents public. But disclosures and reports of rape are becoming more common. Even three decades ago, we would not have found as many reports of rape as we do nowadays. While a woman who has been raped is still marked as a woman 'stained,'² with her life, her 'honour' and the 'honour' of her family widely regarded as permanently tainted, things are changing slowly, as women and their family members are coming forward to report abuse and demand punishment for criminals, irrespective of their 'dishonour' being proclaimed. Consequently, the apparently [epidemic](#), or steeply rising [rate of rape](#) in the country is, to some extent, disputable. It cannot

be determined exactly how far it reflects the rising number of rapes, or the rising number of reports of rape, or both.

‘According to Ain o Salish Kendra, a Bangladeshi human rights organization, 907 women or girls were raped in just the first nine months of 2020. Over 200 of these cases were gang rapes. Since these numbers are based on media reports and most survivors do not report assault, they most likely capture only a small fraction of the true number of cases of sexual violence against women and girls in Bangladesh.’ (See the full report [here.](#))

Apart from the excuse of acting on sudden and uncontrollable sexual desire or temptation, the purpose to disgrace is one of the oldest reasons for committing rape. A sure-fire way to disgrace a woman or a girl profoundly and irreparably, or a cruel way to take vengeance, is to rape. I have read several reports in newspapers from Bangladesh over the years and I have known of girls being abducted and raped by men who first approached them romantically. When the men’s advances were turned down, and their inflated male ego hurt by rejection, (or when such behaviour from a girl or woman had become reconstructed as disrespect or disobedience), they decided to ‘teach the girl a lesson’ by ‘staining her honour’: that is, by raping her. Sometimes these ‘lessons’ were gang rapes. There are also incidents of raping women on account of conflicts between families, or to take revenge on a member of a woman’s family. Recently, the incident of a woman being raped at gunpoint and later attempts at blackmail to force her into repeatedly submitting to rape again by using video footage of the first rape, has made headlines. When the woman refused to give in to pressure, the perpetrators did leak the footage, which was then followed by huge protests:

‘... footage of a young woman being violently assaulted and gang-raped by a group of men in the south-eastern Noakhali district went viral on Facebook, after the video was released by the attackers to blackmail and shame the victim.’ (See the full report [here.](#))

This bears proof that in our society, the practice of shaming victims of rape, and to hold that shame as leverage, is still alive.

During the 1980s and 1990s, one of the notorious means of vengeance against a girl who rejected a man’s demands for sex or marriage, was to throw acid in her face, to disfigure her permanently. It was a feared and not infrequent practice in Bangladesh, as well as in other parts of India’s subcontinent, for some two decades. Incidents of throwing acid have been reduced in number nowadays, due to stricter legal measures concerning the selling and

buying of acids, as well as against the crime of throwing acid – but such attacks still take place. Furthermore, ‘getting back at a woman’ is sought also through rape, gang rape and revenge porn (that is, filming and disseminating of rape). I am not claiming, however, that rape is a substitute or replacement for throwing acid, or that ‘revenge rape’ did not happen before for similar reasons as now.

Rape is a way to dominate, intimidate, abuse, punish and scare women. While on the one hand, an old crime with deep roots in the history of human ‘civilization’, in my opinion, it has also been reinvented. Driven, as ever, by chauvinistic psychology, and abetted by reconfigured stereotypes and attitudes, it seeks to demonstrate that the outside world is unsafe for women. Those women who dare to cross boundaries – boundaries of home, or of family or society roles – are depicted as prone to inviting danger, or as either deserving of or immune to suffering.

Once a girl is raped, regardless of any sympathies extended towards her, she becomes an outcast, not a regular member of the community any longer. This transition does not need a declaration. And it does not matter that she still has the same economic or political status and rights as she did before: there will always be whispers about her now. The satisfaction of the male/s who raped her has this social persecution as one of its targets. Another purpose is that no other man will now want her: the possibility for her to get married to a decent suitor is almost completely destroyed. The future prospects of this girl are dark and desolate. (It is not the subject of this piece, so I shall not go into detail as to why, in traditional Bangladesh, it takes a man to give a woman a secure social status through marriage, and why the identity of a woman on her own is not enough to deserve respect – but these are still the realities for the majority of Bangladeshi women.)

In the case of a married woman being raped, a divorce or separation is not uncommon. For a man to live with a woman, to be more specific, with ‘his woman’, who has been ‘enjoyed’ by other men, is a question (to translate from Bangla) of *spine*. His status of ‘being a *man*’ is at stake according to the social mores. As a man, he is ‘entitled’ to a woman who is ‘pure’ and ‘fresh’ and, thereafter, ‘his’ alone. It is, therefore, not expected for him to ‘keep’ or ‘deal with’ a ‘damaged product’. And if he chooses to support his violated wife, there is no escape from embarrassment and mockery. Therefore, in most cases in our society, maintaining social

repute means more than sympathizing with, or supporting an abused woman whom the society holds as tainted. Very often it entails distancing oneself from victims of abuse.

In our social system, the ‘chastity’³ of a woman remains the most important and valued thing about her. A woman who has been raped has lost her ‘chastity’. Understandably, therefore, many victims of rape in Bangladesh choose to commit suicide: because of humiliation at being violated, physical trauma, fear of social exclusion and because of the other social precepts, on account of which the victim considers herself to be completely ruined for life, untouchable, and tainted to everyone else and herself, since she is not ‘chaste’ any longer. In a twisted way, a sense of shame and guilt overwhelms the reality of her being the victim. Her socio-cultural training makes her think that it is *she* who has been responsible for bringing disaster upon herself and her family: it must be something that she has done or said, or something else about her, that has brought on her doom.

The victim of gang-rape in the incident I have mentioned above, [says](#), ‘My life is already ruined ... I am now worried about my children, especially my daughter.’ The story of Purnima Shil makes it to the [BBC's shame](#) series. Purnima Shil was gang-raped in northern Bangladesh at the age of 13 and she has not been allowed to forget it. Shockingly, even many years later, someone shamed her by creating a pornographic Facebook page in her name, supplying her photograph and telephone number.

Rape, in our culture, is not just an experience that is both physically and mentally traumatic on an individual level. Social and cultural phenomena further contribute to exacerbating private experience and personal agony. I do not wish to imply that there are no exceptions. There *are* survivors of rape who struggled their way out of the cocoon of shame imposed on them and go on to thrive in their lives and careers. Moreover, the prejudiced mindset is also being challenged and resisted by more humane stances. But these attitudes are nevertheless deeply rooted, and they prevail – as is attested by a steady stream of horrifying news stories of rape.

The norm in Bangladesh is that while a person who is physically challenged or who has been in an accident is applauded for overcoming adversities, this is not the case for a woman who has been raped. Women from an educated background, or women from the upper economic and social classes may sometimes have the financial means and the necessary understanding

of their rights to make use of legal measures, or to draw some advantage from a more supportive and liberal surrounding. But speculations about the victim and her character are still likely to persist. Victims from less privileged communities, meanwhile, are likely to fare much worse.

2. Rape and politics in Bangladesh

Political rape has similarities with revenge rape. Rape has, to my knowledge, been used to silence voices of protest. Even the threat of rape can intimidate and deter. I will refer to an event that my country witnessed in 2018.

In August of that year there was a large-scale protest against road accidents caused by the recklessness of drivers of public transport vehicles, many of whom lacked proper training and valid licences. Death by road accident had become a daily occurrence. After a series of deaths, which included school-going students, school students, too, began marching on the streets, demanding justice. It began as a peaceful protest, until, after a couple of days, different political parties, both the ruling party and the opposition parties, sought to utilize this demonstration by the youth for their own interests. Following some skirmishes, the protests went on for more days. Neither a thrashing by the police, nor the shenanigans of the political goons could bring this protest to a stop. What did bring the student movement to a halt was an incident, or the rumour of an incident, that several girls who had actively participated in the protests, had been kidnapped and were repeatedly gang raped at one of the local offices of the ruling political party in Dhaka. The news spread like wildfire and brought about a state of total chaos and confusion. Fear now consumed the protesting students and their guardians. It is unclear if the alleged incident actually took place. No rumour was reliably substantiated. I have seen no proof and no victims ever came forward.

A declaration from the government, promising to take the necessary steps to improve the transport situation in the country and to make guilty drivers accountable, came right after the incident, or rumour, that I am referring to. As far as I recall, the student movement was called to an end abruptly right after the allegations of rape. I would not say that the girls who protested on the streets had not been harassed by goons. I cannot even claim confidently that the rapes didn't take place. All I *can* say is that the threats of murder or beating could not

discourage the protestors from seeking justice, but the rumour of rape acted as a strong and prompt incentive to call off the demonstration.

In the context of crime and politics, let me say that many incidents of rape never come to justice because of the political shelter enjoyed by abusers. This is not a new scenario in Bangladesh. No matter the party in power, the practice of abusing political power to commit or to overlook crimes, including, alongside extortion, bribery, and favouritism, crimes of rape, remains and sometimes happens quite openly. People directly involved in politics, or who associate with someone politically powerful, occasionally exploit the benefits of such association and power.

One [incident](#) of gang rape by some members of the student section of the ruling political party (Bangladesh Chhatra League) took place in September 2020 and drew a lot of attention and protests. Police rescued the rape victim, but no arrests were made. The incident demonstrates that under the shelter of political parties or political power rape can happen with impunity. In such situations, the raped girl or woman and her family usually do not dare to raise their voice against the perpetrators, knowing that they court danger by speaking up. If such incidents somehow get heard about, there is a public outcry, and the media and social media sites blaze up in a demand for justice. But any span of hope for the victim and her family is very short-lived, because attention is normally quickly drawn away by some other national or international, social or political issue or crisis. Meanwhile, the family is left to deal with the monotonous and tiring judicial procedures and a long and slow trial, their lives entangled in the red cord that holds worn-out files together. Most of the time in these circumstances, the rapists spend some time in hiding, away from public attention and protests, let the situation cool off a bit, and then return emboldened, merry in the knowledge that their crime will go unpunished. The victim and her family, however, are left vulnerable and open to threats and further abuse from the abusers and their political allies.

For political rapes in Bangladesh, I also want to point to several incidents involving tribal women. The tribal groups live in the mountainous southeast of Bangladesh, the Chittagong Hill Tracts, as well as in some northern regions. These groups often have their own languages, culture and religions and tend to be socially disadvantaged when compared with ethnic Bengalis. There are accounts of tribal women being raped by members of the Bangladeshi army, as well as reports of tribal women and their female leaders going missing

or being found raped and murdered. Once again, I would say that rape is being used here as a tool for exerting vicious political pressure and intimidation. Such sexual brutality has historical precedent in the living memory of some of the population of Bangladesh. It is to this dark chapter I turn next.

1971: The political history of rape and religion in Bangladesh

From March to December of the year 1971 our nation passed through the most traumatic episode of our history. These were the 9 months when we fought for our independence from the rule of Pakistan. Three million Bengalis were killed and an estimated 250,000 women (possibly [many more](#)) were raped by men of the Pakistani army.

Throughout history, sexual violence against women has been common, as well as strategic, in warfare. As Sally Scholz puts it, 'War rape intimidates the enemy... It demoralises the enemy. It makes women pregnant, and thereby furthers the cause of genocide. It tampers with the identity of the next generation. It breaks up families. It disperses entire populations. It drives a wedge between family members. It extends the oppressor's dominance into future generations' (Bangladesh Genocide Archive, see [here](#)).

The Independence War of Bangladesh is an example of such violence and the scale is particularly horrific. International news media reports⁴ covering the wartime situation in Bangladesh recorded that the Pakistani army was given orders to rape Bangladeshi women and to impregnate as many of them as possible. The agenda was, in part, a politico-religious one: Pakistani soldiers admitted that they were told that the Bengali people were Hindus. This, in turn, was deployed to legitimate violence against them. There are [pictures](#) from the war that show men being checked for circumcision, to see if they are Muslim. With Bengali women, Pakistani soldiers were told it was their religious 'duty' to impregnate non-Muslims and make Muslim babies. Both murder and rape were an objective during this war, fulfilling political and religious agendas and taking a dreadful toll.

The residue of *forced* Islamisation in Bangladesh and continued sexual violence against women

Bangladesh is now a Muslim-majority country. For all the brutalities of forced Islamisation in 1971, religious conflict and oppression are not what defines the nation and its culture. Instead, a simultaneity of practices and religions contribute to a rich blend. Moreover, there

are mainstream cultural rites in Bengal that do not have to be explained with recourse to any specific religious background. Hence, we celebrate our Bengali [new year](#) in April, usually on the 14th of this month, as per the Gregorian calendar. The Bengali calendar was initiated during the reign of the Mughals in India, by Emperor Akbar. Almost all the people of the country celebrate this new year. If there are any religious rituals to be performed on this occasion, these depend on individuals' or a particular community's choice. Customarily, people wear new clothes, they cook something sweet and special at home, they arrange for some celebrations to welcome the new year, and, in recent times, there have been festive processions, where all are welcome to join in, dance, and display bright colours.

But in 2015, during the *Mangal Shobhajatra* (the '[Rally](#) of Bliss or Welfare', that is what this procession is called) in the capital, Dhaka, there was a ghastly incident. Some young women who were participating in the procession were surrounded by men who ripped off their clothes and sexually assaulted them in broad daylight. There were serious accusations made against law enforcement officials that police did nothing other than watch the assault happen.⁵ Only a few men acted in the aid of these women and were badly beaten up, while most of the spectators kept a safe distance, because the assailants were aggressive and armed. Some of these assailants are still at large; some are said to be being protected by political allies.

I will direct this discussion towards the heated argument that followed the incident. This discussion was primarily on social media and between liberal thinkers, on the one hand, and those with a more conservative outlook, on the other. Let me also point out that some of the political parties known for their extremist and fundamentalist religious views made use of this incident. Among the points that came to the forefront after the incident, was whether the very festival itself was acceptable. This is an argument that dates back to another incident that should be mentioned here to clarify the agenda. In [2001](#), on 14th April, at Ramna Batamul in Dhaka, one of the key spots where the main cultural programme for the Bengali New Year celebration has been held for many years, there was a series of bomb blasts where at least ten people were killed and more than fifty injured. The Islamist fundamentalist group Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami (banned in 2005) [acknowledged their involvement](#) in the attack. The same reason was given for the justification of the attacks in each of 2001 and 2015: namely, that Islamic traditions need to be 'protected' against contamination from non-Islamic traditions, such as celebrating the Bengali new year with music and other cultural performances that are

asserted as being un-Islamic. From this perspective, forms of celebration like the procession are ‘Hindu’, or adapted from Hindu traditions.

The second agenda in the spotlight with regard to the 2015 assault was whether women should participate in public events like these. According to the conservative voices, what was at issue here was that women were not safe, because they were not with their guardians (meaning, male guardians), or in their own ‘protective’ circles, but amidst a mass of unknown peoples. Arguing that the women’s lack of safety had been amply demonstrated, they maintained it was of monumental importance that women should *not* take part in any such public processions or celebrations. From an Islamic point of view, too, they stressed, women should not dress, or act, or behave like this: to mix and mingle with men to whom they are not related. To sing and dance in public and celebrate in the open in such a way, apparently violates Islamic code. If women do so, then it is only *natural* that they will be harassed by men, who will *obviously*, or *naturally*, take interest in them, not-so-much in a respectable way, but in a way that leaves them free to think that these women are *inviting* sexual attention.

The question arises, whether what happened in 2015 was ‘just’ a group of ruffians attacking women at the spur of the moment, or whether this was a pre-planned act of violence with the motive of creating havoc during the celebration so that it would be called off for good, or, at least, thoroughly reformed? The orchestration with which the attack was carried out, as was made visible by the CCTV footage examined later, suggests that the latter possibility is the more credible. As more and more arguments against the celebration, often centring on the clothing and conduct of women, came to the fore, the bigger grew the question as to whether the incident was an act of premeditated chaos.

The idea that women’s clothing is responsible for inciting assaults or attacks is very common. Whether what women in Bangladesh are wearing is in line with the proper Islamic way to dress is also an issue of ongoing debate. After 2015 the argument came to the fore yet again.

The most common or regular garments for women in Bangladesh are the salwar-kameez and saree. Women also wear western outfits, like trousers or long skirts and tops. Women rarely expose their legs or go out without a dupatta (the shawl-like scarf, worn widely on the subcontinent). Even with western outfits, it is common to see women wear a stole, shawl or

scarf. Dresses of backless or off-shoulder styles may be seen at certain private parties but not as regular or public wear, and even then, such are limited to certain classes or groups. Class, economic status and physical surroundings play a role in terms of choice of clothing, but it is apt to say that women in Bangladesh generally dress in a reserved, or modest manner, if not always in a conservative one.

Also, it does not take someone to be a social or cultural analyst to notice that in recent times the use of the hijab has seen a radical rise insofar as women's attire in Bangladesh is concerned. Women in my country did cover their heads and hair before, as a mark of respect, such as on any religious occasion, when facing the elderly, and sometimes, too, just on account of being habituated to it. The long end of the saree, worn on a woman's shoulder, used to serve that purpose, as did the end of the dupatta. The burka has also been worn by women in Bangladesh for quite a long time, especially by women who did not go out of their houses much. In such cases it was more of a cultural prerogative, rather than a religious one: Bangladeshi Hindu women also mostly stayed in the inner chambers of the house, and when they came out to the front, they too used to cover their head with the saree, so that their faces were completely hidden. But the more women came outside, beyond the confinements of their homes, to be educated and employed, the less they wore veils or other face and head coverings, certainly for a time. The notion of hijab as a commonplace, let alone a necessity, was not present in the society. Nowadays, however, the majority of women in Bangladesh, all ages, all professions and all sections of society, are taking up the hijab.

Many in Bangladesh, including myself, are of the opinion that since Bangladeshi women, Muslim and non-Muslim, already dressed in a modest fashion, which included covering their heads, the emphasis on a 'proper Islamic way' and habitual wearing of hijab in public spaces seems unnecessary and excessive. What I also find objectionable is that this recent insistence on covering the female body is not only tagged as 'the proper Islamic way', but is placed in direct confrontation with other, more inclusive expressions of our culture and tradition of dressing in a covered manner. But now these expressions are regularly tagged as 'non-Islamic', 'improper', 'provocative' or 'the way of the Hindus'. Even saree and salwar-kameez are put into a competition with one another on the grounds that saree is supposedly more 'revealing' and 'alluring' while salwar-kameez is more 'covering' and 'respectable'. In this way clothing is religio-politicised and garments formerly accepted and respected have become weaponised to incite friction where there previously was none. Moreover, not only

garments but those who wear them, or who are associated with them, are being categorised as ‘respectable’ or ‘immodest’. The message is, one who dresses in western outfits, or ‘Hindu’ outfits, or who is ‘less covered’, invites and should expect gazing, teasing, touching, pressing, pinching, rubbing, or sexual assault. And, by implication, men have a right, or at least a defence, to behave in such a way. In my experience, however, it is *not* the case that modest dress prevents such attacks either. Instead, the practice of assaulting female bodies is an [epidemic](#) in Bangladesh.

I have nothing against hijab as a religious statement or clothing preference. I believe women can be feminists, progressive, free-willed, in any clothing of their own choice and comfort. If this is a choice of their own and reflects the religious ideology they hold, then hijab or any other garment reflects their own freedom of choice. But in Bangladesh, hijab is not always a choice made by a woman of her own accord. It is a choice occasionally *made for* a woman by her family, or by social pressures. In my experience, a large proportion of women who do not believe in the philosophy of hijab, or in covering one’s head in all public spaces and places, or who simply do not want to wear it, are forced to wear it because of pressure from family members, or employers. There is also a social force attached to the idea of hijab nowadays. Women who wear hijab are seen as ‘more respectable’, as I was saying before.

Let me explain with an example. Whenever a girl complains about being harassed in some way, or of getting unwanted attention from men, the first advice that she receives is to start doing hijab: then she will be respected as a Muslim woman and people will treat her differently. Blunt propaganda is circulated on this issue: such as, a woman without a veil is like ‘food that is not covered’ (that is, exposed to view as well as to ‘dirt’ and ‘defilement’). A prominent Islamic speaker of Bangladesh went to the extent of saying that women are like tamarind fruit and that it is only normal that men will ‘drool’ over seeing them uncovered! This quote has caused outrage, and people have protested at the appalling objectification of women in this statement. It has since become a source of comic relief in discussions of women’s clothing, gender equality, women’s rights and the like. This statement coming from a public figure, a religious speaker, is not only a public offence against women, but at the same time, it again justifies men’s abuse of women. The social manifesto regarding hijab, in my opinion, has outdone the religious one. Many women are not wearing hijab because they believe it represents any particular religious obligation, like praying or fasting does; they do it to satisfy the judging eyes of the society.

Sexual harassment of women from religious minorities in the country, especially of Hindus, is rising, as is harassment of women from less privileged sections of society. Women from the lower middle class and below, are the worst affected, as records confirm. Once again, this is not new. But the rate these days is alarmingly high. I have come to know, too, that some Hindu women, particularly from the lower socio-economic classes and from rural locales, sometimes take up hijab in an attempt to protect themselves. It helps in being identified as Muslim rather than Hindu and also confirms the social prerogative of hijab.

I am concerned about the religious classification of clothing, specifically of women's clothing, as well as about the vague and baseless proposition that hijab keeps harassment in check. The bottom line is, yet again, that women are expected to take responsibility for keeping men in check and have to do so by confining themselves.

I have already mentioned that religion and religious practices are very much entwined with political agendas in Bangladesh. The question here is, does this overarching need to 'protect' Islamic ways against non-Islamic, including 'Hindu traditions' of Bengali people, somehow bear resonance from the 1971 propaganda that Bengalis need to be taught Islamic ways and be made Muslims? Again, women, just like before, seem to be the primary mediums and victims to implement this idea. More than one school of political and cultural analysts in Bangladesh is of the opinion that finding 'the right ways to practise Islam' is not just done in a religious cause: it is also a politically invested one. With this I concur.

In the political landscape of Bangladesh of almost 50 years ago, in 1971, there was a group who actively supported Pakistan and fought against the independence of Bangladesh. Holding on to the Muslim fraternity, as suggested by Pakistan, was of greater significance to this group than preserving Bengali identity or attaining sovereignty. Alongside the Pakistani army, they killed Bengali people and raped Bengali women. They were declared as war criminals, with proof of their crimes against the nation of Bangladesh, and after independence, most of the leading members fled the country. But after a few years, during the first military regime in Bangladesh, after 1975, these leaders found their way back into the country and were permitted to take an active part in politics. They formed political parties, which no longer spoke out openly in favour of Pakistan, but their political agendas and manifestos remained similar to those propagated during the period of the Pakistani regime,

against Bengali nationalism. Although under the guise of Islamic fervour, it was no secret that they worked for and supported the cause of Pakistan.

[Harkat-ul-Jihad-al-Islami](#), [Jamaat-e-Islami](#), and some other political parties and organisations, which are now banned and no longer eligible to participate in elections or any political campaigns, were formed in Bangladesh by the leaders who worked against Bangladesh during the war. And these parties have promoted values and ideas that replicated those of Pakistan prior to 1971, always in the name of Islam. Therefore, even upholding the Islamic tradition or being conservative and following the Islamic code of life is not as simple as being devoted to the primary religion in Bangladesh. There has been a persistent and politically invested religious cause at the heart of the very existence of Bangladesh and the identity of being a Bangladeshi national. The forces of Islamisation have some uncanny resemblances to the forces of ‘making Bangladesh Pakistan again’. And, as it happens, women were the primary targets of attack in accusations of marring or threatening the idealised culture earlier, and they still are. Hence, when it comes to making women become ‘ideal Muslim women,’ and making them dress in ‘proper Islamic ways’ and not in saree, which is sometimes labelled as ‘the attire of the Hindus,’ it is not just a religious manifesto, but an intended interference with the cultural ways of our people. Consequently, there is more to be read between the lines. Those who promote these ideas may be thinking and acting in ways that promote more than just religious ideals.

The rape of the ‘covered’, the ‘infant’ and the ‘old’: Does provocation matter?

Allegations about women’s clothing were confronted vigorously and belligerently, following the rape and murder of Sohagi Jahan [Tonu](#), a nineteen-year-old college-going student, on 20 March 2016. Social media erupted, because Tonu wore hijab and followed strict Islamic dress code, fully covering her head with a headscarf and her body with modest full-length robes. Tonu was gang raped and murdered, her body discarded. People challenged that if women are really raped on account of wearing provocative dress, then how is it possible to justify the rape and murder of a girl wearing hijab? The motive for Tonu’s rape and murder is still under investigation. It is not established if this was a political murder, a case of revenge, or an act of random brutality. But the whole nation burst into protest in response for a couple of months. And then there were several cases of rape of children, aged from 3 months to 6-7 years of age, that followed the case of Tonu and also caught media attention. Moreover, there were

rapes of more than one woman aged 70-80 years, one or more of them bedridden because of frail health. These, too, brought into focus the claims of victim-blaming.

Scorn and sarcasm followed in response to these awful cases, again challenging the argument that it is dress that does not conceal the curves of the tempting bodies of women that provokes uncontrollable desire in men. What ‘provocation’ might one find in the body of a young child or of an elderly woman? What dress code could possibly keep them covered enough to protect them from the perverted sexual drive of perpetrators? Is bodily provocation by women real in every or any scenario, or is it a generalised rape myth?

3. Religious preaching

In pinning blame on women for *provocation*, for being out of line in terms of behaviour, or dress, religious preaching plays a significant role. Every Friday, after the Jumma prayer of Muslims, there are sermons held in every mosque. These sermons are known as *khutbah*. These are religious talks and advice given by the imam, who leads prayers at the mosque and acts as the community’s religious leader. It is the men who attend the Jumma prayer at the mosque, and there are loudspeakers set up so that whatever is said during *khutbah*, can be heard by the rest of the community, who are not present at the mosque. These talks are generally meant for religious guidance, for the salvation of the soul, for addressing the wrongs in people’s lives, the corruption in society, and ways to avoid these, making reference to the Qur’an and [Hadith](#).

One of the most popular topics is the demeanour and misdemeanour of women in society. Both those who give the talks, and the audience, take a particular interest in this topic – and I am speaking here from my first-hand experience of regularly hearing these talks. The way of addressing topics concerning women is very often not only demeaning but threatening. Criticism of women ranges from the age of Adam (meaning, Eve was responsible for the fall of humankind from paradise), to the present day, where almost every mishap in the world has got some sort of tie to wrongdoings of women. Criticism of the attire of women, women’s choice of career, women making decisions for themselves, speaking out for their rights, claiming equality with men, not being obedient to men as their masters and superiors, the modern feminist thoughts contaminating the psychology of women, and (mis)guiding them to

fall from their God-given roles as wives, mothers and homemakers... these appear to be among the most popular focus areas of these discussions.

The other popular kind of religious conferences are known as *Waj* or *Waz Mahfil*.⁶ Huge awnings are set up for these in open spaces, usually a field, or a large playground. A stage is built, loudspeakers are set up, and there is lighting and sometimes arrangements of food for attendees. There can be one specific speaker, or there may be more. These *mahfils*, or gatherings, sometimes go on for days and nights in a row. And the topics of discussion are not much different from the ones of the sermons I have just mentioned. The biggest difference is that they are much more elaborate, given the length of time to dwell on these topics.

The talks, or lectures, are religious speeches and emotional in nature, playing on the religious sentiments and sensitivities of devotees. Theoretically, they are meant to influence the good in people's hearts and inspire benign deeds and charity, like any other sermons. But while maintaining the façade of godly guidance, these lectures occasionally turn into *hate speeches* directed at other religions, modern ways and values of life, as well as at women and some other groups in society.

I must say that not just sensible women, but also many men, find some of these talks preposterous. But I must also note that these sermons do find their way into the psyches of those who are familiar and comfortable with patriarchal structures of society, or who are consciously or subconsciously willing to conform to them. Given the threatening nature of these speeches, they can brew fear and guilt in devotees' hearts, especially concerning the consequences of present deeds for the afterlife. Consequently, these lectures can manipulate the psychology and actions of some listeners, including good God-fearing people. And it is not very difficult to persuade some of the male contingent of the audience, to agree with these sermons: not only do the messages conveyed benefit them but they are elaborated on with examples and quotes from religious texts. Moreover, (mis)interpretations of these texts are, unfortunately, often neither challenged nor authenticated. The disdain and misogyny that are transmitted build up and accumulate, and religious sensitivity works as the conduit.

Allow me to summarise the most common subjects about women in these talks:

- Establishing the stereotypical gender roles for women as obedient homemakers, wives and mothers. Meanwhile, women who divert from this 'righteous path' are branded as whores.
- Emphasizing the importance of purdah, or hijab, or veils, for preserving both women's good character and men's control of women, because, apparently, women without veils are the ones responsible for men losing control and deviating from the right path.
- Focusing on the danger that women and men who believe in gender equality and women's education and empowerment pose, because these ideas stand in opposition to the given code of life, which already, according to these speakers, gives women respect and equality. Such 'Western ideas' are 'polluting'.
- Badgering about women's liberation, because this has led, or ultimately will lead, to the degradation of moral and religious values.
- Speaking against women's right to birth control, since the female body is designed to be fertile, ready for 'ploughing' and reproduction.⁷
- Establishing that women are of lesser intelligence and worth and therefore always in need of being controlled by the men in their lives. Moreover, they are most often the reason behind any disaster that happens in a family.
- Speaking hatefully of and demeaning women and justifying their abuse at home and outside. Occasionally, they speak of punishment for 'deviant' women directly, including of stoning and lashes.
- Stating that if a woman takes control or leads, in the house or in the world beyond, it can only mean that disaster will follow.

These talks can get violent and graphic in their descriptions, and revulsion for women, implicit or explicit, can be intense.

It is really important that I now draw some attention to the listeners. I have referred to classes earlier in my discussion. Here, in these *Waj Mahfils*, or extended religious sermons or conferences, a huge number of listeners, it is even no exaggeration to say most of the listeners, are from the lower and underprivileged classes of society. Attending the lectures is usually free of charge, meaning no registration fee or ticket is necessary. Therefore, attending *Waj Mahfils* becomes part of the extracurricular activities of their lives, with the advantage

that learning about Islamic ways fulfils a religious duty. The other classes have more options for extracurricular activities, as well as for access to alternative sources of information. The social and economic insecurities and dependencies of the lower classes make them easy prey for manipulation.

But I would not want to characterise the audience as being limited to the poorer social classes. The organisers of these *Waj Mahfils* are usually from a section of the higher economic classes of society. They give large donations for these events to be arranged and have their ‘courtesy’ acknowledged. Speakers are also paid handsomely, and also belong to the well-to-do sections of Bangladeshi society. Furthermore, because of the availability of recordings of *Waj Mahfils* on YouTube, devout people from all sections and classes of society have opportunity to listen to these lectures on their smart phones or laptops. There are also apps nowadays that have the audio recordings of these speeches for download. When you are travelling on a bus, you may hear these lectures, because the bus driver is playing the recorded speeches on a CD player in the vehicle. (Protesting about this can lead to shocking reactions.)

The attacks in these speeches seem to be reserved primarily for a certain category of women: those who are educated, take up professions outside the household, live outside of stereotyped gender roles, and take control of their own lives, sometimes dressing in a fashion not approved of by conservative Islamic code. Most of these women are from the upper classes, or from the middle class of Bangladeshi society. They are diplomats, teachers, researchers, administrators, entrepreneurs, journalists, scientists, doctors, lawyers, engineers, activists, and they are almost equal in number to and successful alongside their male peers. They are forging their way through social prejudices and obstructions, and making their presence known. Exceptions apart, women from the lower classes cannot access such opportunities. The value system of these classes helps to keep them firmly within the boundaries of patriarchal structures. They do get education, and may also be employed, but what makes their situation different from the higher classes is that awareness and understanding of equal rights are not within their grasp and they are more vulnerable to the machinations of patriarchal structures.

The women who speak of equal rights can be perceived negatively by women of these socially disadvantaged groups listening to the sermons. They can trigger revulsion, as well as

envy. And it is effective and unifying to point the finger at privileged women, singled out for blame. Vendetta against women, in a way, is sometimes a vendetta against women *from a particular class*, namely the privileged class, since this is where women are more able to practise the liberty to transgress. In this way the frustrations of deprivation and the detriment of underprivileged lower-class people can be manipulated by blaming select women.

4. Attacking attention

I came across several incidents of sexual assault and harassment posted by victims on Facebook. In one of these cases, a girl describes her incident as follows. She was working as a private tutor and was on her way to her student's house in the evening. On her way, while crossing the highway by a foot bridge, she was approached menacingly by a male passer-by. She was prepared with pepper spray for this kind of situation and she sprayed it at him. As a crowd grew around them, it was *the assailant* who got the mob's sympathy! First, members of the mob presumed *her* to be the attacker and a probable thief, who had tried to seize an opportunity to steal from the man. It took no time before the mob cast aspersions, saying why would a woman from a *respectable* family be out on the streets at a time like this (that is, in the evening)? She can be no 'decent' woman. And why was she not in hijab? She mentioned she was in regular clothing, wearing a top and trousers, with a dupatta. The crowd was not ready to hear her allegation of being menaced by the man. The language that men from the crowd used was horrible: they called her a slut, they threatened to *rape* her then and there, because she *deserved* it. Then they did physically attack her, throwing her to the ground, kicking and slapping her, and ripping off her clothes. She writes that it was by sheer luck that a police van appeared on the street right then and, although the police also did not believe her story, at least, in their custody, and at the police station, she felt a lot safer than she had felt in the crowded road. She had barely escaped being gang raped out in the open. She had not been in any dark alley, or lonely corner when she was attacked. Many had participated in the attack on her and others had lingered to participate as spectators.

I will not describe each and every incident that has sparked a public outcry or caught my attention. But I will mention the similarities of a number of incidents that have taken place – and are still taking place – in Bangladesh.

- Several incidents have been reported by women that have taken place in public buses, when these were crowded. According to these reports, women have felt and seen male

passengers press and rub their exposed genitals against them. If the women responded with resistance, the perpetrators often got off the bus at the earliest possible opportunity. Being touched intentionally and inappropriately during a journey on public transport is not new. In fact, this is one of the most regular kinds of sexual harassment that very many women in my country have experienced. I myself have had such experiences. But what I have heard in recent times is more bold and more outrageous.

- There is an alarming number of incidents of girls travelling alone on buses being raped, gang raped, and occasionally murdered, with collusion and participation by bus drivers, supervisors and other staff. In most of these cases as they are reported, when a female passenger is alone on the bus, the driver and his assistant(s), on seeing an opportunity, plan an attack and call in some more associates (thanks to the availability of cell phones), picking them up from some convenient place on their route. Several social media posts have also described women barely escaping rape on a bus when they realized the risk, practically jumping off the moving vehicle and risking injuring themselves, and also men, helping women to safety when they anticipated the events unfolding in an almost empty bus. One of the early victims of a series of bus rape (and, in this case, murder) incidents was Jakia Sultana [Rupa](#).
- There are numerous reports of exhibitionists on public transport. Single female passengers in a cab, or taxi, or rickshaw, have found the driver to be masturbating in their presence. In some cases, drivers made advances towards female passengers in a vulgar and aggressive manner.
- And then there are those incidents where a female complains and protests when harassed sexually in public and the crowd turns on her, blaming her for being ‘outspoken’ and for speaking of *such things* in public, or for dressing irresponsibly, especially if she is not in hijab. In a crowded bus, if a girl protests at being touched inappropriately by a male fellow passenger, he or others may suggest that she take a private means of transport if she cannot tolerate such *accidents*. It is now quite common for people present to side with *the offender*. The best justice that a woman can often expect in these situations is that the offender gets a slap on the wrist and she is requested to ‘let it go’ and forgive him.
- Sexual harassment and other inappropriate and sexist conduct in workplaces are also not new. Topics of conversation and ‘banter’, like periods, pregnancy, speculations about the marital or relationship status of a woman, changes in a woman’s figure after

giving birth, or simply the figures and features of female co-workers, can make the workplace one of vulgarity and voyeurism and, therewith, utterly unpleasant, hostile and threatening for women. Frustratingly, such talk is often not even considered harassment or sexism.

I classify all of these actions – from microaggressions to physical violence – as *attacking attention* against women. Such hostile attention is not new but is becoming bolder and more public, targeting especially women singled out either for their vulnerability or for being ‘deserving’. In either case, the victim is blamed – either for finding herself alone, or for deficiencies in her perceived ‘respectability’.

5. Class and rape

Why class is a factor in rape and in justifications for rape, is the next part of my discussion. Forced and non-consensual intercourse, or rape, and other abuses of women, happen in *all* social classes. A rapist, an assailant, someone who nurtures the intent to rape or assault, can come from any class or section in society. But upbringing, surroundings, experiences, lessons and guidance from those to whom one looks up, do contribute to the construction of one’s values and perspectives and character.

There are two points that I would like to focus on in this section. First, when I refer to ‘class’, I tend to mean the three basic economic and social classes (‘lower’, ‘middle’, ‘upper’). But apart from these, there are those men and women who belong to another group that believes in gender equality and think beyond barriers of religion. This class is formed of men and women from all of the socio-economic classes, but middle-class and upper-middle-class persons form the majority. Second, this is also the class that happens to be ‘the other’ and, therefore, the target of aggression and attacks.

As it happens, there seems to be some pattern in the current kinds of public assaults on women, and in the words spoken by the men who are taking part in these assaults. Most of these men are not ready to accept or assimilate ideas like ‘gender equality’ or women being anything other than homemakers. While they may encounter women in positions of authority, they do not respect them, or identify the women in their own homes or communities with

such women. They may assume that career women neglect the responsibilities of a ‘proper’ wife, mother and homemaker and look down on them, seeing them as *other*.

My observation is that since these women are *others*, it is easy to lay blame on them: any kind of blame. And this othering also makes them a target for assault. This is fuelled further when the dos and don’ts come through what is supposedly a religious filter, like the speeches in the Waj Mahfils. Like these speeches, the growing and blatant aggression against women happens in public spaces, as discussed in the previous section. Additionally, there is also verbal assault and ‘trolling’ on other public and social media fronts, like Facebook and Twitter. I do not find it surprising that the UN and human rights organisations like Amnesty International have released statements expressing concern at the escalating cases of sexual violence against women in Bangladesh (see [here](#)).

Economic class also plays a role in terms of who is most at risk of rape and abuse. Women who can afford to travel by private vehicle are less exposed to some of the threats I have described. They have higher levels of security, as well as comfort, and greater choice in terms of what to wear. But women who travel by public transport are regularly subject to harassment and are subjected to more judgment and social pressures to conform to dress codes.

It is said that wealthy women, travelling in private vehicles, are beyond the reach of ordinary men, but none the less incite male desire. They are imagined with smooth skin, manicured nails, a well-maintained figure, and as living in luxury with the time and leisure to care for their beauty. This, in turn, drives men crazy, because they know that they can never ‘get’ these women. The women who are raped, are therefore, often constructed as ‘substitutes’ – as having ‘to do’ because other, more privileged, women are unattainable. I intentionally use the descriptor ‘substitutes’ in inverted commas, as it comes from public opinion, and is not my word. Notable is, again, that either which way women are blamed – blamed for being unavailable and raped on account of being unable to escape.

I concede that men may fancy women from posh and polished backgrounds. But I do not agree with blaming women – either for their privilege or for their vulnerability. Once more women have become the culprits, accused of aggravating men’s sexual desire.

6. The influence of media

To deny that media, especially visual media, plays a significant role, in my opinion, is to turn a blind eye to a blatant truth. Fictional representations in movies or television drama may not be the ultimate determiner of who we are or become, but they do shed light on some realities, and on how we choose to represent them. Moreover, they have an effect on audiences – and producers and advertisers are well aware of this.

In Bangladeshi media, there are different kinds and genres aimed at different audiences. (This is likely to be true also elsewhere – but here I confine my focus to Bangladesh.) The audiences that I am referring to here are not necessarily determined only by age groups. Some productions are aimed at particular classes in society.

There are two mainstream cinemas in Bangladesh. The films of one of these streams are made by educated film makers, intellectually rigorous in content, and many have won international awards. The audience for these is from all classes, but the majority is from the middle class and educated sector. Rape is not a recurrent subject in these films. I should rather say that rape is most often a subject when a film is about the 1971 war. This is because to picture this war in any way honestly or accurately, it is impossible to avoid altogether the stark reality of the mass rape that happened then. Also, I think it is easier for the filmmakers to address the subject of rape with regard to events in 1971, because rape happened at the hands of others, namely Pakistani soldiers, and it is easier to pin blame for such a gruesome crime on those from whom we have some distance. But any fictional portrayal of recent rapes, happening in Bangladesh at the hands of Bangladeshi men, is not a subject in these films – probably in part because of the soul-searching and discomfort it would raise.

I would also like to raise the fact that portrayals of the 1971 rapes, end with the horror of rape *at that time*. To my knowledge, other than a handful of documentaries, there has not yet been a film that shows the terrible aftermath of rape or gives insight into the lives of rape survivors following the war, the women whom our father of the nation, Bangabandhu⁸ Sheikh Mujibur Rahman declared the *Heroines of War*, or Biranganas.⁹ Their treatment, their struggle, their rehabilitation and their lives after all these years, are not a subject of these films. And neither are the lives of the children born during and after the war from the rapes a subject of fictional

representation in drama. In my view, this is indicative of the topic being still too entangled in stigma to be explored in film before an audience.

And then there are the other mainstream commercial cinemas of Bangladesh. Commercially successful, these target predominantly the large audiences from the lower classes. Viewers from the middle class, or the upper classes, scarcely go to the cinema houses to watch these movies, because, for the most part, they fail to meet sophisticated tastes and expectations. Leaving out the details of these productions, I will come to the subject at hand: the representation of rape, rape victims, attempts of rape, intentions of and reasons for rape, and planning of rape.

When I say that rape happens to be a very popular and intense subject in multiple plots, if not *the* main plot, I will not back down. Let me summarise the facts and features of *rape scenes* in films from this category:

- The rapist is almost always a powerful man, either a local leader or the head of the community, or a wealthy businessman, or a politician. Sometimes, when the subject is gang rape, the group of thugs is sheltered by an influential, powerful mastermind.
- The reasons for rape are lust for a woman, to humiliate, to take revenge, or simply to make a point about the power that the rapist wields. The implication is that the powerful think it is within their rights to enjoy any female body they fancy, since they hold power, be this economic or political, or both.
- The trauma of the victim is almost always absent in the after-rape scenes. A few bruises suggest hurt, but not the full extent of the matter. What remains in focus is the unbearable *shame* that the rape victim endures. A suicide scene follows in many films, and sometimes a permanent psychological disorder caused by utter shock from the debilitating shame of the incident.
- Although in many cases, the target of rape is the heroine of the movie, almost every time, her 'honour' is preserved, because she has a saviour, the hero. She is the victim of *attempted* rape, but not rape. The side-actors, however, are not so fortunate. The rape victims in these films, therefore, are almost always someone other than the heroine, though mostly someone close to the hero, a sister or the mother, so that rape works as a strong incentive in the story for her *honour* to be avenged.

- The act of rape and the struggle of the victim to escape are pictured with details that are disturbing and may incite sexual excitement or feelings of voyeurism in the viewer.

Do aspects of the presentation of rape in these movies seem similar to what I have described above about reasons for rape, political rapes and social victimisation of rape victims?

Seemingly, these echo elements of reality. But one major problem lies in the fact that these realities are presented in a manner that creates pathos, sympathy and titillation more than revulsion at and resistance to rape. Rather than focusing on the severity of the crime, the terrible impact on the victim, or raising an outcry against rape, rape is presented with a reluctant acceptance: as an inevitable thing, something ‘men do’ when they have power or want to practise revenge. That means, although rape is recognised as an offence in these films, rape is also accepted as a vice that just ‘is’ and will continue to exist in society. The force with which other vices are depicted and critiqued – like corruption, murder, abuse of power, or exploitation – is somehow lacking with rape. Even when rape is central to the plot of a film, it is the shame endured by the victim that is emphasised, not the violence and repugnance of the crime itself. The revenge taken on the rapist also plays a central part, while matters of justice and law are side-lined completely. Revenge, however, while it can serve a release of emotion, is not a realistic solution to the problem of rape scarring our society.

There is another matter, too, that cannot be overlooked: namely, that the image of a beautiful woman being raped is the focus of these dramatized rape scenes. This trope apparently has tremendously commercial value. And again, what tends to be stressed is voyeurism, not the fact that this act is a terrible crime. The rape scene can even be said to be a perverted substitution for a scene of lovemaking. In Bangladeshi films, scenes that contain kissing or intimations of sexual intercourse are very uncommon. Depictions of sex, which play a part in making a film a commercial success, are instead channelled in rape scenes. In this way, the protagonists stay ‘chaste’, in accordance with social ideals, by not being depicted as engaging in explicit sensuous actions. This way, the viewers can continue to idolise them. But audience demands for sensuality or titillation are met as well through the conduit of another actor, the ‘stained’ one. Disturbingly, therefore, rape fulfils a consumer demand in these films.

As I said already, the heroine is almost never the one who is molested or raped, although she is almost always an object of the villain’s sexual desire. Her allure for multiple men

(including the villain and the hero) actually enhances her sexual appeal. But the heroine, who is meant to capture the attention, admiration and affection of the audience, is not someone who is or can be 'stained'. To remain acceptable to the audience and to the hero she cannot be. Whether consciously, or not, this reinforces the notions that rape renders a woman unworthy and that a man cannot accept, or continue to love, adore and respect a woman who has been 'stained' or 'enjoyed by other men'. The presentation of rape in the movies, in short, focuses on the shame of the victim, not of the rapist. If a rapist is ever depicted as having any regret, it is because his life is under threat, not because he comes to understand the harm he has wrought. Rape stigma is reinforced in these films, not resisted.

Rape is still a largely absent theme in television dramas, another popular media genre. The audience of television dramas is even larger than that of the mainstream commercial films I have just discussed, and viewers are from all classes in society. In these productions, the topic of rape is avoided. While they offer somewhat realistic presentations of other aspects of everyday life – family dynamics, day-to-day failures and frustrations, struggles and troubles, joys and successes, heartbreaks and unions – the subjects of rape and sexual assault are not represented. And yet, as discussed extensively here already, these can now be said to have reached crisis proportions, constituting a grievous social problem that many in Bangladesh, particularly women, have to contend with on a daily basis. Indeed, the omission is a surprising and glaring one. Harassment is sometimes a topic in the television drama, but the extent of the problem is not captured in this genre of visual media.

The representation of career or professional women in both cinema and television drama or soap operas is another factor that I find contributes to the perception and, consequently, treatment of women. More aptly, the woeful *absence* of the representation of professional women and the *misrepresentation* of women's careerist attitudes are what is damaging. Does this aspect seem irrelevant to the topic at hand? It is not, actually. While discussing rape culture in Bangladesh, I have already made the point that sexual aggression, while targeted at all kinds of women, often seems pointedly targeted at professional, progressive-minded and career women. Even with a considerable percentage of women from all sections of society being in the workforce and supporting their families, the judgmental attitudes to educated women, or women ambitious in their career are worrying and designed to keep women subservient and disempowered. Media representation plays its part in this.

I repeat, the influence of media cannot be overlooked. I have witnessed how dialogue from a blockbuster movie, or a popular television drama, is on everyone's lips overnight. A particular design of a saree or salwar-kameez can become popular fashion because it is worn by the key character in a popular television serial or a famous heroine in a movie. I have seen particular occasions, like Valentine's Day, Fathers' Day or Mothers' Day, being popularised due to their gorgeous presentations in media productions. And with media influencing our lives and affecting our choices, I have not found its contribution to affirming women's equality with men, or women's roles in professional sectors to be helpful.

I can be more specific in terms of the representation of professional women in television dramas in Bangladesh. Older women, meaning women playing the roles of mothers, for instance, are almost never portrayed as professionals. They are always 'just' housewives and mothers. The only profession they are sometimes to be found in is teaching. But a point to be noted is that a considerable number of women from this generation in Bangladesh have for long been serving in a variety of professions with commendable proficiency and success. And yet, they are almost never depicted in such ways in the media. So, the representation of older women does not accurately reflect Bangladeshi society, but it does serve and reinforce conservative expectations and stereotypes!

As for the representation of younger women in the media, meaning the heroines or female protagonists, they are mostly university-going students. While this sounds promising, the troubling factor is, that they are depicted as preoccupied entirely with their love-lives. Anxiety and stress over study, or employment after graduation are a preoccupation only for the loves of their lives, meaning, their boyfriends or fiancés. The chief tragedy in their lives is that they cannot get married to the man they love, since he is not yet employed, and her family wants her married at the right age and to an established and employed suitor. Their tragedy does not, somehow, concern their own employment or unemployment, or their own career. Again, this is not an apt representation of young women's lives and again, serves the convenient agenda that women ought to get married, be dependent on their husbands, and seek fulfilment in homemaking and motherhood.

On rare occasions when women are shown to be professionals, they are usually teachers. Some are shown to be in the corporate sector, and a small number of them as doctors. But the many other professions that women are in nowadays, which they willingly and adventurously

choose, are never in the picture. There is a popular idea in Bangladesh, something that nearly qualifies as a proverb, that ‘teaching is the most *suitable* profession for women’. The portrayal of women in television and media only conforms to that belief and ignores a whole lot of women thriving in other occupations.

When a woman *is* shown to be in a high-ranking position, in a corporate job or similar, she is represented as a divorcée, or unmarried. The implication in both cases is the same: she has chosen her career over family life, or love-life. And it is also common in these depictions to find sarcasm and disapproval coming from a man that she once loved. Moreover, it is not uncommon that she regrets her decision to pursue a career and sacrifice a relationship. A woman who is *both* married *and* with a thriving career is almost never to be found in the media productions. The problems and stresses faced by women who negotiate both within the patriarchal structures and expectations of society, also receive no mention.

While discussing rape and rape culture, why did I go to such lengths about the misrepresentation or the absence of realistic depictions of professional and career women? Earlier, I pointed out the harassment that women face in public places or on public transport, and the reactions of some men when they are confronted by women who resist, or when they themselves confront the women. My discussion on the misleading representation of professional women serves to point out that if such depictions, which profess to be realistic portrayals of life, fail so miserably in capturing the realities of life, then the viewpoints of much of the enormous audience is distorted. I do not claim that all media productions are the same or that there are never exceptions. I do not argue that the viewpoint of a society is formed entirely or even predominantly by media productions. But I do dare to say that it is high time that the entertainment sector, particularly of visual media, in Bangladesh does more to become part of the solution, rather than perpetuating distortions, damaging stereotypes and, consequently, some of our society’s grave problems. Media *does* play a role, sometimes a subtle one, but certainly a role in shaping or consolidating mindsets. Social media *is* playing a vital role in raising issues of equal rights for women, as well as publicising both domestic and public harassment and abuses of women. Both men and women are speaking up, writing on these issues, raising awareness, and taking a stance. Some television programmes, like the talk shows, also discuss issues of rape, oppression of women, and gender equality. But I feel strongly that the popular media productions meant for entertainment should also be providing more truthful insights and perspectives into women’s lives and experiences. This, surely,

could achieve a great deal in terms of summoning empathy and understanding for women's circumstances and difficulties in the home, in public and in places of work, including for victims of harassment and abuse. And that could be an important step towards addressing rape culture in Bangladesh.

Next, I want to touch on representations of women in productions from Bollywood and Hollywood, as well as on the effect of these on Bangladeshi audiences. Bollywood and Hollywood films have an enormous audience and influence in Bangladesh.

Unlike Bangladeshi films, recent Bollywood movies portray working and career women. It is commendable that these movies have *normalized* the portrayal of women working in multiple sectors. The movies portray, for instance, female astronauts and police officers – even within their commercially-g geared storylines. The prime, let alone the only, target of a woman's life in these films is not necessarily to find a husband and the motto is not just to devote oneself to family life. Also, protests against assaults on women, issues of rape and sexual abuse are vibrant themes in Bollywood films. One very worthy example of a stand against sexual assault of women is *Pink* (2016).¹⁰ The same can be said for a good number of Indian television and web-based serials, which also portray women as active in the workforce, or which deal with themes such as assault and abuse, both sexual and domestic, in a nuanced and believable way.

These films and serials have an audience in Bangladesh, too. Their influence on Bangladeshi audiences is two-fold, roughly speaking. There are those who appreciate these films, and there are those who are not swayed by the depictions of sexual violence. This is not only due to patriarchal attitudes (which, of course, exist in India, too) but on account of these films being hard to relate to and perceived as exotic, from a different world and reflecting different worldviews. The dress that the female characters in these movies wear is one reason why audiences from Bangladesh do not identify with them. Their dresses may be very regular ones for upper-class Indian women. I take it that in the big cities like Delhi or Mumbai, professional women sometimes dress freely in western-style attire. Short skirts and tank tops may be common alongside salwar suits and sarees. But this is not the case in Bangladesh. I have mentioned before, Bangladeshi women are more reserved in their dress, right up until now. And, with the increasing number of hijabs, and the rising pressure on women to be in

Purdah, it is likely that a big portion of the viewers are of the opinion, ‘it all happened because of her dress’.

Those who argue that women’s dress is responsible for assaults, point the finger at the garments of the heroines, or at what Bollywood actors wear, especially in the songs that are included in the films. They say things along the lines of, ‘These dresses not only taint the tastes of women in our country, but also, women in those dresses play on the desires of men and leave them lusting.’ It is not surprising that when the regular, modest dress of women in Bangladesh is criticized for being too revealing, then dresses that are intended to allure and invite *the gaze* will be met with a frown. Bollywood presents a way of dressing up, both for men and for women, which influences fashion trends. While western dress is not yet in the mainstream fashion for us in Bangladesh, Bollywood has more influence on saree, salwar-kameez and other local dresses. When it comes to Bangladesh, dresses are made to be less revealing than the pieces of inspiration from Bollywood.

In the songs in Bollywood films, especially the party songs and those that are known as ‘item songs’, women, including the heroine, dress in ways that reveal, display, market and commodify each part of the female body. Let me say emphatically that these are *not* the dresses that are available in the markets of Bangladesh, or seen on women anywhere, let alone on the streets. These dresses are meant for those particular songs, which are one of the key attractions of the films. The songs are designed to sell the films and the product on display to the gaze is the sexualised female body. I am aware that there is research being conducted on Bollywood’s representation of women, so what I have to say here is not new. So, in these songs, there is usually a large number of female dancers dressed in as little as possible. Moreover, they move their bodies – their breasts, waists and hips – in ways that are sexually suggestive. They dance and physically engage with the hero or other male actors. In another scenario, there are songs where there is only one female dancer, usually the heroine, or another famous actor cast only for that song in the film, and there are multiple men dancing with her, and shown to be enraptured by her beautiful body. The settings for these songs are sometimes brothels, or dance-bars, or strip-clubs – places suggestive of sex, while the lyrics objectify the female form. The songs portray the woman as just a body, and a very sexually enticing one at that.

I refer you to the lyrics of two very popular songs from two very box office successful movies. The first is an item song from the movie Dabaang 2, released in 2012 (see lyrics [here](#)). Bollywood superstar Kareena Kapoor was cast for this song. She does not appear in the main storyline of the movie, only in this song. The second is a song from the film Agneepath, released in 2012 (see [here](#)). Another Bollywood superstar, Katrina Kaif was cast in this song, which again is an item song, where she appears only for this song in the film. The metaphors used in this song can be said to be aesthetically beautiful, portraying a woman along with her sexual and sensual potency. The setting of the song, the gestures of the male co-dancers, and the dance moves, however, serve to render the lyrics more vulgar. I could go on and on with examples like these.

As I see it, the dress that I choose to wear is meant for my own comfort and satisfaction. Neither the skin I show, nor what I cover, is for the pleasing of men. The portrayal in these films suggests something very different. I am not against expressions of feminine sexuality or against showcasing female beauty. But when these become above all an *exhibition*, there to feed the male gaze, and when female beauty and bodies become commodities, then any potential for these being liberating or affirming for women is diminished. Some of the Bollywood productions, even those that are actually worthy of some aesthetic and artistic merit and of critical acclaim, in my opinion, compromise their value and worth by objectifying women.

In terms of Hollywood, or other popular English-medium movies, I have just one observation to share here. Although there is a big audience for English language films, which are usually produced in either the USA or the UK, the viewers treat these films as from a very different culture, where women behave *differently*, unlike ‘our’ women, and dress up *different ways*, which are not common in our culture. Some women in my country wear trousers and tops, or, skirts and tops, and these are not uncommon. Rarely, however, would women wear any garment that goes above knee-level, or any top that is more revealing (such as crop tops). Modest dress is important, not least because, whenever conservatives in my country accuse ‘the West’ of ‘corrupting’ and ‘polluting’ our women and our culture, they never forget to point a finger at Western dress.

Somehow, Western dress for Bangladeshi women, is synonymous with corrupt Western thoughts and with ideas of women’s independence and empowerment. At the same time,

‘women’s independence and empowerment’ is somehow equated with women believing in ‘free sex’. Hence, a common comment, found, for instance, on social media goes along the lines of, ‘she is dressed in Western attire, which means she is inviting; if she can give out to someone of her choosing, then why wouldn’t she give out to me?’ According to conservatives, meanwhile, the idea of gender equality or women’s empowerment, is ‘foreign’, ‘imported from the West’. Some maintain that India has already given in to such ideas, and this might ‘contaminate’ out women, too. Again, the first step of that contamination is dressing up in Western fashion.

At the beginning of this article, I refer to cultural confusion and to our culture being caught between Western ideas and conservative standards. My point is that a substantial portion of the young population in my country, both men and women, from almost every section of society, try to adapt to Western modes of life, while at the same time, feeling the pressure to devote themselves to traditional and to Islamic ways. This leads to conflicting ideologies. Caught in this struggle, I find them often to be confused and lacking in perspective.

In discussing media and its implications for rape culture, there is another dark side that I cannot ignore, one that usually reaches its audience through the internet and social media technology.

7. Porn: Feeding the fantasy

What I have to say in this section is already being widely researched. I will, therefore, just summarise a few observations:

- In porn films rape is widely presented as sexually exciting. This misrepresents or ignores the experience of rape for rape victims and rape survivors.
- Even in films where rape is not shown to be a pleasurable experience, the pain and tears of victims are presented in a way to feed the desire of viewers.
- In rape films, rape victims (most often women) are shown as totally defenceless. During rape, they are shown to be fully dominated and also, as cooperating unwillingly. The whole presentation is made to make the voyeuristic male feel powerful and aroused by the feeling of power and dominance.
- There are videos that gratify and normalise the concept that ‘pain is pleasure’. Participants are shown to want or enjoy painful or ‘rough’ sex. While desire for such

sex does indeed exist, in porn films it is standardised, which can set up expectations that violent sex is what most people want, or should want, or will come to like.

- There are videos that show women and young girls being sexually harassed in a crowded bus or train. Sometimes, these videos culminate in the rape or gang rape of these females. Other passengers are often depicted as completely indifferent, as if there could be nothing more normal than a girl being abused. The girl, on the other hand, is shown to be either embarrassed and uneasy, or to be giving in to pleasure, but never as protesting. The early scenes of these videos are alarmingly similar to the experiences of women in public transport that I have referred to earlier. The escalating boldness of male attackers on public transport may, in part, stem from such videos. What is entirely inauthentic and most alarming of all, however, is the victims' response of compliance or complicity in the videos.

The impact on actual victims' lives is vividly recorded in the reports that I have come across, many of which focus on settings in Japan. Shockingly, in one of these, a victim, reminiscences, 'When I was in high school, every [girl] was a victim' (see [here](#)). I am not surprised that there is a special category of pornographic video showing Asian schoolgirls being abused on public transport. And I have little doubt that the gropers on public transport in Bangladesh are encouraged by these videos.

- Not only porn films acted out by professional porn actors, but videos of consensual and non-consensual sexual intercourse also find their place on different porn sites. There are numerous reports of such videos or photographs being used as revenge porn or for blackmailing the female. But once these are leaked and disseminated, the victims suffer a fate comparable in some respects to that of a rape victim.

Rape is indicative of perverted sexual drive and/or a desire to exert power violently.

Pornographic presentations of rape feed this. I will not rehearse here the various arguments as to whether pornography has positive or negative impact on society. But I will say for sure that there should be some measure of control, even if pornography is to be sustained as a *necessary vice*. ***It cannot be left unchecked*** so that it is easy for an already corrupted mind to ***get more ideas*** to indulge in.

I have discussed here the subject of rape and the matters relating to rape in the context of Bangladesh. But I understand that variants of these matters are to be found in almost every society and culture. Rape, oppression and sexual abuse exist in many, or most, societies,

though in different forms. I have not tried to compare the situation in Bangladesh with that in other countries but rather, to provide some insight into what ‘rape culture’ looks like in my country. In doing so, I have pinpointed particularly some of the most disturbing features about the sexual abuse of women and girls occurring in Bangladesh in present times.

There is one last point I would like to call out: namely, the shocking failure of the judiciary in Bangladesh. ‘Naripokkho, a women’s rights organisation, found that in six districts between 2011 and 2018, only five out of 4,372 cases resulted in a conviction. Overall, only 3.56% of cases filed under the Prevention of Oppression Against Women and Children Act have ended up in court, and only 0.37% have resulted in convictions’ (see [here](#)). Bangladesh is not treating the violation of women and children with anything like the gravity and urgency it needs and deserves. Much more needs to be done to protect victims and bring perpetrators to justice. This must include making the process of judicial trials more efficient and more effective. It is necessary to change the mentality and machinations of the patriarchal society; this is a slow and gradual process. But justice in the judicial system can and must be expedited right away.

Women are and have been oppressed, in Bangladesh, as in other countries. In my view, the present Bangladeshi brand of rape culture is in some part at least the product of and is sustained by a struggle between different kinds of patriarchy – which draw from Bengal tradition and history, conservative religion, local and external, including Western and other sub-continental, influences. Resisting this rape culture will also need action from multiple directions – from educational and religious, political and legal, entertainment and popular culture directions among others.

¹ Bangladesh is a Muslim-majority country. Approximately 80%+ of the population of Bangladesh is Muslim. Although the religious environment of Bangladesh is largely harmonious and friendly towards other religions practised here, the Constitution of Bangladesh declares Islam to be the state religion.

² With the word ‘stained’, I am trying to capture a very literal English translation of the Bangla word most commonly used to describe a woman who has been abused, raped or molested.

³ The concept of a woman’s ‘chastity’ is a sensitive one in Bangladeshi communities. It can be partially interpreted as a synonym for ‘fidelity’ and it also connects to virginity (in the case of an unmarried woman). But it is more than that, because it applies only to women. Chastity for a woman becomes compromised when she is involved in a consenting relationship outside of wedlock and also when she is molested, or forced. There is no real distinction between the two in terms of damage caused to her chastity. As I said before, a woman used or abused by a man with or without her consent is taken to be one who has been ‘stained’. The unchaste, meanwhile, has no place within the circle of acceptability.

⁴ For one example, published in the New York Times in 1972, see [here](#).

⁵ For more detail and analysis, see Nusrat Sabina Chowdhury, 'The Ethics of the Digital: Crowds and Popular Justice in Bangladesh', pp.133-150, in *Crowds: Ethnographic Encounters*, ed. by Megan Steffen, London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2019.

⁶ A Google search for Waz Mahfil yields many examples of these sermons.

⁷ In a YouTube video, I have heard one speaker go to the extent of saying that pregnant women, or women in labour, should never go to a medical practice where they might 'lie naked' in front of a male doctor, because this is despicably sinful. He added there are *bitches* giving birth on the street and they don't need a doctor and survive. He also made the analogy that women in the past also did not have to go to the doctor or to hospital and yet bore 10 to 15 children. He even said that his own mother gave birth to 11 children and never saw a doctor. According to him, these 'modern practices' of regularly seeing a doctor when pregnant, or 'opting' for a C-section are against God's will.

⁸ This is a title given to him by the people, which means, 'the friend of Banga'. Banga is a region of Bengal and is equated here with Bangladesh.

⁹ The word is Bangla and feminine gender for 'hero'. The raped women of 1971 were termed Biranganas, or Heroines of War, in recognition of their suffering and sacrifices, the torture and the trauma they suffered. Instead of the shame so often attached to raped women, this designation and address signifies a reversal. The Biranganas are held in no less regard than those who lost their lives and limbs fighting in the war as soldiers.

¹⁰ *Pink* is critically acclaimed and has been nominated for and won several best film awards. The movie's plot circles around an incident of sexual assault of three independent working women who live together, and the repercussions within and beyond the judicial procedures. The conflict between ideas of women's rights, and traditional ideas of how women should act and behave, is competently portrayed in this film. Through the mouth of the Bollywood legend, Amitabh Bacchan, the movie sends the message that when a woman says 'no' before, or at any point during a sexual encounter, that refusal must be respected and not violated. If it is, Bacchan conveys, then this is not 'just sex' but rape.