

A Flower That Will Never Die

The Story of Popy Rani Das

Written by Tasnia Shahjahan (2014)

Whether it is the best Thai cuisine in town, the roadside fuchka or simply mother's home cooked dinner, we all have our periodical cravings for our favorite food. Such was the case for 21-year-old Popy Rani Das, until she took a leap into the wrong direction in life. The malicious trap of marriage seized not only the little happiness that remained in Popy's life but also her ability to eat and drink her to satisfy her taste buds. Prior to her birth her parents had filed for a divorce and her father passed away when she was only 5 years of age. Like many other rural areas in Bangladesh, young aged marriages have been popular culture in Kishoreganj too. On January 2009 at the age of 21, as a medical technician at Jahirul Islam Hospital in Gazipur, Popy got married to a young goldsmith named ProdipBanik. Banik, hungry for dowry would abuse his wife day in day out. Within 8 months, their marriage had gone sour.

On September 7, 2009, Popy, who had been suffering of a severe fever, had simply requested her husband for a glass of water. The egregious acts that followed, is beyond justifiable. Taking a gulp from the glass of water that she had thought would appease her thirst and save her life had in reality been a gulp into acid that demolished her life. At consumption, an instantaneous sensation of uneasiness ran down Popy's esophagus. Unsure of the situation and consequences, Popy gradually lost consciousness. At the news of her unconciuousness, her beloved mother and aunt did not pay much attention believing that it was simply a consequence of her fever. Only after three days had passed, her mother, overwhelmed by the realization of what had happened, took her to the Jahirul Islam Hospital, where she as an employee, received free treatment.

Soon after, she moved to the Acid Survivors Foundation where she, till date continues to receive free of charge treatment as well as accommodation. In dismay Popy says, "This feeling of perpetual thirst cannot be quenched; I cannot drink water."¹ A completely burnt throat and esophagus has left Popy to depend on mashed food provided to her through an incision made in her abdomen. Through an education initiative that ASF had taken on board after the termination of her treatment, Popy was enrolled into grade 9 under the Open University, spending a total of BDT 30, 000 as IGA support. This effort however, became a futile attempt as a result of physician recommendation that Popy remains at ASF and refrained from movement due to her incision.

This has also imposed a social barrier on Popy, acting as a interruption in terms of engaging in proper employment despite her expertise in sewing, handicrafts and henna art. Her excellence and talent in this field has permitted her to be serving as the trainer and instructor of the Sewing and Handicrafts training sessions for the fellow survivors, which is organized under the Income Generating Project at ASF, through the financial contributions made by the King Baudouin Foundation, a Belgium based Donor Agency. As an artistic individual Popy has also excelled in the music and art therapy sessions that she receives at ASF. The post-incident trauma that Popy had encountered along with the additional burden of societal discrimination had made it an arduous process for her to be accepting of the situation. Nonetheless, Popy has shown a positive response to the therapy sessions and has made notable progress in terms of physical health and psychological conditions.

Marital life is often associated with affection and pleasure, yet for many individuals, such as Popy, that life has taken such a bearing on the prosperous future they could perhaps be living, that there is no turning back. Popy does not long for an opulent life; the fight for survival remains the greatest fight in her life. For further treatment it is essential for Popy to travel to Australia, however the exorbitant costs that are entailed with her case has acted as a hitch to further progress. As a further encumbrance to Popy's case, a lack of prompt action by the police despite a lawsuit being filled, Banik has left to freely wander the streets, perhaps as a potential threat to many other women and a motivation to many such men.

Acid abuse cases, in regards to the failure of fulfilling dowry requirements or simply refusal to relationship advancements have been very common in Bangladesh. The high number of incidents like Popy's is most remorseful, as the perpetrators are not held accountable for their sinful and heinous actions. Little to no interest on behalf of the authoritarian bodies has left this nation as an open invitation for such crimes to continue. We the people, along with the policy makers and other authoritarian bodies of Bangladesh, must take a stand against the perpetrators and to put an end to this battlefield; to make all our citizens feel protected and sheltered within the borders of their own motherland.

¹ Translated by writer