

One more nail in the coffin of free press



THE SOUND & THE FURY
SUSHMITA S PREETHA

A barrage of fireworks light up the smoggy skies of Dhaka and I feel as if I'm in the opening scenes of a dystopian film. There's anxiety and despair all around about what's to come—those who have been following the developments in other parts of the world know there's no way to avoid the impending crisis in our healthcare system as it scrambles, without any preparation, to tackle what may soon become a tsunami of patients showcasing symptoms of the coronavirus. The streets are uncharacteristically empty, and the rickshaw puller, for whom self-quarantine would mean the loss of his daily wages on which his family of five depend, asks me if I know how much these pyrotechnics cost.

Our conversation is silenced by the loud explosions. Yes, I remind myself, celebrations must go on—priorities are priorities, after all—and I know better than to mention the unmentionable, even in a private conversation with a rickshaw puller, even on social media and particularly in opinion pieces published in *The Daily Star*. The nagging thought that I'm trapped in a dystopia returns as, with each firework that sounds like a gunshot, my mind finds itself ruminating over the fate of photojournalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol, who has been missing since March 10, 2020. The coronavirus crisis and the resultant chaos and mismanagement have understandably taken over the news, and while we worry about what will happen to our loved ones if the virus spreads beyond control, Shafiqul's son has been living an unimaginable nightmare of his own, not knowing where his father is and whether he is still alive.

Kajol is the editor of a fortnightly magazine called *Pakhahal*, with past experience in working as a photojournalist with *Dainik Samakal* and *Banik Barta*. He "disappeared" a day after a case was filed against him and 31 others, including the editor-

in-chief of daily *Manabzamin*, under the Digital Security Act by lawmaker Shifuzzaman Shikhor, a former aide to the prime minister. They were accused of "deteriorating the law and order" by publishing a report with "false information" and circulating it on social media.

The report in question, published in *Manabzamin*, simply stated that Jubo Mohila League leader Shamima Nur Papia, during police interrogation, had shared the names of 30 MPs, bureaucrats and businessmen who used to frequent her prostitution and extortion racket. The report itself did not name any of these lawmakers and others, but it was later

back alone after a while and leaves the area on his bike at exactly 6:51 pm.

Mysteriously, following his disappearance, his Facebook posts from this year have also disappeared. In fact, the last post that can still be accessed on his page dates back to November 27, 2019. According to a report by *Prothom Alo*, many of the missing posts involved the arrest of Jubo Mohila League leader Shamima Nur Papia. The report further added that Shafiqul was known to be on good terms with many activists and leaders of Jubo Mohila League (*Prothom Alo*, March 17).

Shafiqul's son, Monorom Polok, claims that he collected his father's call

pleaded with the police to file an abduction case, but both the Chawkbazar and New Market police stations refused to take the case, each insisting it fell under the other's jurisdiction. The case was finally lodged with the Chawkbazar police station on March 18 following a *suo moto* move from the High Court asking the police why it had not filed a case yet.

Why was there such a delay in filing a case? It would be easy enough to dismiss it as bureaucratic ineptitude of our law enforcement agencies, but was there something more sinister in the reluctance of law enforcers to file and pursue the case? When there is a CCTV footage that clearly identifies men who were following Shafiqul and tampering with his motorbike, why hasn't the police been able to apprehend them yet—in the 12 days he has been missing (as of this article going to print)? Why is Shafiqul's son having to collect call lists when it's the police who should be following leads and questioning all those who may have crucial information on Shafiqul since they were the last to speak to him?

It's ironic that our law enforcers can go to any lengths when they have to track down a dissident using their sophisticated surveillance mechanisms but cannot bring themselves to track a missing person, even when there is a CCTV footage identifying the suspects!

Where did Shafiqul go? What could have happened to him? No one claims to know anything, but if what happened to *Bangla Tribune* correspondent Ariful Islam is an indication of how journalists who ruffle the feathers of the political elite are treated, we have reasons to be deeply worried. On March 14, Ariful was dragged from his home in the middle of the night, beaten, stripped and threatened with "crossfire" by Senior Assistant Commissioner (RDC) Nazim Uddin and two magistrates as part of a mobile court raid (which was later declared "illegal" by Kurigram municipality mayor Abdul Jalil, following widespread criticism). It is now clear that Ariful was targeted for his investigative reports about the activities of Kurigram Deputy Commissioner (DC) Sultana Pervin. As he was being humiliated and tortured, Nazim told him, "So, you are a journalist! We will teach you

what journalism is, you dared to write against our DC"—and "You will be put in a crossfire. Your time is up. Recite the *kalima*."

Ariful's description of that night is chilling, to say the least, and offers a window into those unknown, untold stories of men disappearing into the night only to appear—if they appear at all—as dead bodies in so-called shootouts or after "falling ill" while in custody, with some rare exceptions. Ariful is no doubt lucky that his story was picked up by the media right away and that he had the backing of a powerful media outlet, which protected him from further harassment and mistreatment.

But what about those who aren't so fortunate, those like... Shafiqul?

That freedom of expression is no longer an inalienable right in Bangladesh is not breaking news. According to Article 19, a UK-based human rights organisation, in February 2020 alone, there were at least 50 incidents of violations of freedom of expression—four involved serious bodily injuries, nine assaults, one abduction, five destruction of equipment, two defamation cases and one involved gender-based violence. Despite widespread criticism of the Digital Security Act which essentially authorises state agencies to pick up whoever they want without so much as a warrant or approval of any authorities, under various vague and misleading sections of the law, more than 1,000 cases have been filed under the Act since October 2018—sometimes for as little as disapproval of government decisions on social media. The systematic way in which freedom of expression has been, and continues to be, throttled has created an environment of fear, uncertainty and self-censorship which has caused irreparable damage to the democratic fabric of this country. The disappearance of Shafiqul Islam is one more nail in the coffin of the free press.

And so you and I keep silent in a cowardly bid to protect ourselves from the virus that has seeped deep into our psyche and political systems. As for a dystopian future, haven't we been living in one for a long time anyway?

Sushmita S Preetha is a journalist and researcher.



Photojournalists stage a demonstration demanding the safe return of Shafiqul Islam Kajol, in front of the National Museum in Dhaka, on March 18, 2020.

shared by some, including Shafiqul, on social media with a list of names.

Shafiqul was last seen at his office in Hatirpul at 6:51 pm on March 10. A CCTV footage from outside his office, verified and shared by the Amnesty International, on March 22, shows several unidentified men keeping a track on his motorbike for at least three hours before he was last seen. Between 5:59 pm and 6:05 pm, three men are seen approaching his motorbike separately and meddling with it. At 6:19 pm, Shafiqul walks out of his office with another person but does not take his bike with him. He comes

list from Grameenphone, according to which, Shafiqul spoke to two Jubo Mohila League leaders shortly before he disappeared. One of these two women told *Prothom Alo* that she had spoken to Shafiqul at 6:30 pm about where he was and when he would return, and about setting up a time to meet to discuss his latest Facebook posts. The second woman on his call list denied speaking to Shafiqul but admitted that she had sent him a text and that she, too, had wanted to meet to talk about his social media posts.

For almost a week, Shafiqul's family

Could universal basic income be the answer to ending poverty?



ARAF MOMEN AKA

UNIVERSAL basic income (UBI) is a concept that has come a long way from its primitive form back in the 16th century, when a Spanish Renaissance scholar named Johannes Ludovicus Vives suggested that the Mayor of Bruges give a minimum income to all citizens of the city. The concept has become widely accepted in countries like Finland, India, Namibia, the state of Alaska, etc.

The idea is to pay each and every individual a minimum income, regardless of whether they are employed or not. This income should be high enough to cover the bare necessities such as food and clothing and be untaxable. Whatever extra disposable income citizens earn through employment is theirs to keep.

According to the *Financial Times*, India has experimented with the UBI system in an unorthodox way, giving money to people mainly in rural areas like the southern state of Telangana, the eastern state of Odisha, etc. Conclusions haven't been drawn up yet, as the experiment is still ongoing. But it is believed that it has caused a dissipation in agrarian distress, which had risen because of corruption and unjust exclusion of poor people from anti-poverty programmes in India.

Namibia had a pilot project between

the years 2008 and 2009 called the Big Income Grant (BIG). Grants in the form of UBI in the Otjivero-Omitara area had resulted in significantly lowered child malnutrition, a more productive workforce, greater affordability of education, a 20 percent drop in economic and poverty-related crimes.

Finland's experimentation with UBI yielded a more positive health-oriented result than a financial one. The two-year experiment with UBI ended in February 2019, with results such as reduced levels of stress, better health and ability to concentrate, according to a World Economic Forum article. However, there wasn't much change in regards to retirement tendency among the group that received the UBI, mostly because implementing the UBI does not automatically grant people the skills required to be employed.

Now how would such a concept fare in an economy like ours?

Bangladesh is a country that is still wrought with extreme poverty. According to the Household Income and Expenditure Survey- 2016, 12.9 percent of our population lived in extreme poverty, and 24.3 percent were living in the upper-poverty line back in 2016. Although there is a possibility that the extreme poverty rate is now lower, it still plagues our economy substantially. Extreme poverty and poverty of any kind indicate that a part of the population is encumbered with the inability to access basic necessities for survival, regardless of their employment status.

In allocating a basic income for all people, the government will have to



draw up a Consumer Price Index (CPI) to figure out which consumer goods are essential, and which of those should be taken into consideration. An untaxable monthly UBI of Tk 12,000 should be realistic in the sense that an income like this should be enough to fulfil the bare necessities like food, water, clothing and shared accommodations, given that our essentials are cheaper than in most other countries.

Since this system does not have any clear specifications on the demographic that should be able to earn a UBI, one suggestion would be to provide it to the population that is eligible for work, and the population that has retired. Children are not to be included in the roster.

There is a strong argument against UBI, which is that handing out free

money to people might make them end up being lazier and more reluctant to work. While it is true that there will be a certain percentage of people leaving work and reducing their work hours, it is also true that those people would be more likely to take up self-development activities, like going for further studies, honing specific skills and caring for their families.

Back in the 1970s, an experiment of the UBI system on a group of people in Canada showed a 1 percent drop in the employment rate and around 10 percent drop in working hours. While they were out of work, those people used that extra time to care for their families or for self-development.

As people leave the workforce for such purposes, what the UBI does is

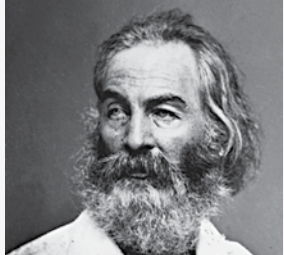
create a more skilled labour force in the future that is capable of occupying jobs that require more knowledge-based skills rather than simple technical skills, or provide technical skills that are far more efficient than before.

That being said, the UBI system will be incredibly expensive to implement. According to the CIA's World Fact Book, it is estimated that 73.52 percent of Bangladesh's population will be above the age of 14 by July, 2020. Let's say, given that most children from poor families go to work when they are 15, the number of people eligible to receive the UBI will be 11.9 crore. And this entire system will cost Tk 1,42,922.9 crore to implement.

In addition to cost, implementing it will require massive restructuring. There is also a huge debate on where the money meant for the UBI system will come from, because it is impossible for taxes to be the only source of money for the system. With that said, it still stands that experimentation before implementation is an obvious prerequisite of putting the UBI system in place.

The UBI system is highly malleable and the market will get to operate as it used to, balancing out oddities with its invisible hand. What sets this system apart is that it manages to close the gap between income levels, eradicate poverty in a single swoop and help people live a happier and less stressful life.

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WALT WHITMAN
(1819-1892)
American poet, journalist, and essayist.

Keep your face always toward the sunshine - and shadows will fall behind you.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 In the lead
6 Croc's cousin
11 Dance of Brazil
12 Fragrance
13 Silky-coated dog
15 Fitting
16 "— Abner"
17 Start of a count
18 Some skirts
20 Parts of hearts
23 Pursue
27 Accomplishment
28 Ready for business
29 Home run, in slang
31 Jacket material
32 Showed over
34 Ocean between Eur. and Amer.
37 Clinic nickname

DOWN

1 China setting
2 Angel's instrument
3 Give off
4 Crunch targets
5 Showy flower
6 Dublin tongue
7 Museum subject
8 Visitor to Oz
9 Foreboding sign
10 Quite uncommon

38 "Modern Family" network
41 Stiff, hot drink
44 Juliet's love
45 Cook's mushroom
46 March 17 honor-ee, for short
47 Left, on a liner

14 Major no-no
18 Bishop's topper
19 Depicted
20 Back, on a boat
21 Pot brew
22 Scoundrel
24 King Kong, for one
25 Take in
26 Finish
30 Very popular
31 Puget Sound city
33 Bird of myth
34 Broadcasts
35 Easy gait
36 Like old lettuce
38 Bushy hairdo
39 Tavern order
40 Boston cager, for short
42 Sailing site
43 Dandy

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

S	B	A	L	K		C	A	S	T
P	R	I	C	E		A	L	O	F
A	R	C	H	E	S		V	E	R
T	I	E	S		E	T	H	I	C
S	O	S		S		Q			
			C	O					
			C	H	A	R	O	N	
			T	A	I	P	E	I	
			A	R	K		A	C	A
			P	L	E	A	T	O	M
			S	O	U	S	A		R
			S	P	A	R		D	O

BEEBLE BAILEY by Mort Walker

BEETLE'S BECOMING A MEDIA STAR

HE HAS 3,000 FOLLOWERS ON INSTAGRAM!

WHAT DOES HE POST?

VIDEOS OF HIMSELF SLEEPING

BABY BLUES by Kirkman & Scott

OFFICE OR MOBILE NUMBER?

OFFICE, INCLUDING EXTENSION

HELLO? HELLO? HANNAH, IS THAT YOU AGAIN?

WORLD'S BEST BUTT-DIALER

HAS ANYBODY SEEN MY PHONE?