

Concern for Kajol during the pandemic

KAMAL AHMED

DOES anyone know what had happened to Utpal Das? If you cannot remember who Utpal is, no one would blame you. Because, he is not a celebrity like all those familiar faces on our TV screens. Utpal, however, was in the news for quite some time in 2017, following his abduction and eventual return after two and a half months from confinement by his abductors. Before his abduction, Utpal was working as a journalist at a little-known online news portal called Purbapashchimbd. news. Till today, neither Utpal nor the law enforcing agencies have told us where he was for such a long period and who were behind his mysterious disappearance.

There's a popular perception in society that those involved with the media are well looked after by the media. So, it was expected that the media fraternity would investigate this case and reveal the truth. Unfortunately, it didn't happen. Utpal's silence is akin to that of all other survivors of alleged enforce disappearances in the last decade who had experienced unimaginable trauma.

Shafiqul Islam Kajol, editor of the Bangla daily Pokkhokhal, who remains missing since March 10, reminds us of the ordeal endured by Utpal and many other victims of alleged enforced disappearances. In fact, Kajol's fate seems even worse as attention shifted, justifiably, to a rapidly deteriorating coronavirus situation with fears gripping all within the country and beyond. Kajol's case remains shrouded in mystery due to several suspicious events that occurred prior to and after his disappearance. It has now emerged, after 21 days of his disappearance, that a second case under the Digital Security Act was registered against him three hours after he went missing. According to the rights group Amnesty International, the second case too was filed by a leader of the women's wing of the ruling party.

Firstly, Kajol is a co-accused in a defamation case under the much-criticised



Family members, friends and colleagues of the missing journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol form a human chain demanding steps for his safe return.

FILE PHOTO: COLLECTED

Digital Security Act, filed by an influential ruling party MP on a flimsy ground. Secondly, CCTV footage released by the Amnesty International shows that he was being closely monitored and followed by a group of people, which gives us sufficient reasons to suspect foul play. Even though their faces are clearly visible in the footage, no one has yet been identified, let alone arrested. Thirdly, the refusal and reluctance of the police to registrar a case on behalf of his family gives a genuine sense that something is not right. Thanks to the resolve of his

family and friends, a High Court bench of the Supreme Court intervened after 9 days of his disappearance. But since then, except for filing a case, police have not given us any update. These are factors that raise questions about the role of the state in this regard.

Government spokespersons frequently argue that some of such disappearances are voluntary for various reasons. According to them, some of them disappear to dodge business partners to avoid repaying defaulting debt, or some as a result of family quarrel. Some of the disappeared who later returned

alive remained silent about their ordeals, which worked well for their abductors. But data compiled by rights groups show a disturbing trend as a majority of these abductions remain unsolved. Data compiled by the rights group Odhikar shows, in 2019, there were at least 34 incidents of alleged enforced disappearances. Eight of the disappeared were later found dead, 17 were shown arrested, while the fate and whereabouts of the remaining nine remain unknown. It is unclear whether any of these deaths and missing cases has been

investigated, and if so, their outcome was not made public.

And it is quite natural that people shown arrested from different places and times than the original abductions would prefer to remain silent about their ordeal. Some of them accused in acts of terrorism, however, made such allegations during their trial. But those claims were largely ignored. Rights groups now describe this phenomenon as unacknowledged detention by the state.

In Kajol's case, the government seems unmoved despite pleas from his family and various national and international rights organisations. His family members' allegations against security forces for picking him up seem more plausible since the emergence of the CCTV footage. Kajol's son, Monorom Polok, has rightly said that tracing a person in this modern era was not difficult for the government. Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and the Committee to Protect Journalists have all stressed on the urgency to investigate his disappearance.

True, the coronavirus pandemic has put us all in a very difficult situation. But wherever Kajol is now and in whatever conditions, his ability to fight against the contagion is likely to have diminished to a great extent. It further adds to the family's agony. It is high time the authorities took the issue of freeing Kajol as a priority, whether he is under unacknowledged detention by any state agency or any non-state actors. Please heed to his son's plea, "All I want is to get my father back, safe, and unhurt." The harsh reality is, if we assume that he is unhurt and will be freed, he still has to fight an undue and unjust legal battle to clear his name under the draconian Digital Security Act, a most abused legal tool to suppress freedom of expression in the country. The pandemic is a cause for concern for all other alleged unacknowledged detainees too, and freeing all of them should be considered urgently.

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Corona-shaming exposes the fault lines of our society

ZOBALDA NASREEN and GOPA BISWAS CAESAR

IN Nathaniel Hawthorne's *Scarlett Letter*, we read about how adulterers had to wear the sign "A" across their chest. We even have examples in local literature and popular culture like the one of Humrati, from Shahidullah Kaiser *Sangshaptak*, or that of Rakhee Gulzar's character in the 1998 hit Indian film *Soldier*.

Yes, after a collective shout, we are stamping overseas returnees with "PROUD TO PROTECT BANGLADESH/ HOME QUARANTINED UNTILL..." in a similar way. We believe it is important to explore the meaning(s) this mark bears in the present scenario in Bangladesh. It denotatively means that the returnees bearing this temporary mark need to be quarantined for 14 days, to limit the contagiousness that has caused the present pandemic. But, for the returnees, the "isolation" associated with the aforementioned mark/stamp connotes "untouchability". And, with the series of viral videos of angry returnees at the Ashkona Hajj Camp to the carefree *rashgolla*-loving biker from Shariatpur, the Covid-19 disease has "earned" the status of a *kharap rog* where many ranging from patients, doctors and nurses to friends, family members and neighbours of the returnees tended to hide the symptoms. However, when the stamp should have only indicated that they have returned from abroad, they are all facing a strong surge of stigma even though many of them do not have the disease. Things have escalated to a level that local residents are almost on the verge of banning the returnees from entering their own *mohallas*, because they have decided by now that these "stamped" people are bad news.

For long, "living in a foreign country" was a symbol of status but things have changed dramatically. Now, in this era of corona, the news of someone's coming from a foreign country provokes a sense of fear, social shaming and stigma. We are advised to keep ourselves away from a sneezing neighbour, to shut doors on our ailing caretakers, etc. for safety measures. We even learned how not to hanker after the money (i.e. banknotes)!

But this has been socially understood and collectively practiced in a "strange" way that requires attention. Rather than limiting public gatherings or maintaining social distance and personal hygiene, somehow our netizens seem more interested in pinning the blame on something or someone. Therefore, soon after the government decides that the bodies of the patients who died from Covid-19 would be buried at Khilgaon-Taltola graveyard, the locals protested and put up a notice at the entrance gate asking the government to not bury the bodies there, and suggested they should find some "safer" place outside of Dhaka instead. The intensity of our will to cut all contacts with them became pictorial when "grown-ups" of Diabari protested after it was announced that Diabari would make space for institutional quarantine of the returnees. The idea of living our last painful days alone, without any kith and kin around, followed by the most deserted cremation is getting on our nerves. Such a formidable crisis has never crossed our thresholds—and now, when it did, we are barely trusting anyone. This is the era in which we have learned how to un-trust, we are flooded with distrust, and as a nation susceptible to rumour, we have learned how to mistrust, too.

In Jashore, we red-flagged residences of the overseas returnees, but another in Manikganj is seen to spread *maya-mohabbat* among his village mates. In response, netizens are trolling them. Journalists hopped in and probably "duly" ran sensational stories about how sassy, selfish, and unruly the returnees are. We are starting to see them as an uncouth and rude group of people who are putting our safety at stake by refusing to practice the ideal model of conduct which means social distancing and self-quarantine. Some of them are asked to go for forced "isolation" and that immediately creates the dichotomy of us-vs-them.

A us-vs-them narrative is already gaining a lot of popularity. We are often taking breaks to raise questions like why we are still allowing flights from coronavirus-stricken countries and occasionally, ridiculing "surreal" comments made by important people of the country that give the impression as if they cannot care less. But the panicky

selfs within us gradually learn to overlook the lack of preparedness which was required as we almost got a three months' notice before the virus came to our shores. But all our minds seek is to find a bad guy—in this case, overseas returnees and the dead. We are trying to banish them from our very own utopic "land of the living" which looks like a very long shot, right now.

How does this dichotomy act in our society? Is it making us inhumane to some extent? Except for a few hospitals, most of the

with fever and cough and fainted due to high fever. His wife's attempt to call for an ambulance did not work out, a phone call to the hotline failed. Nobody responded to his family's plea for getting medical attention, as all are afraid they might get infected with the virus too. Having one member in the family with possible symptoms might make the whole family pay a high price socially. It might lead to having police interrogating the entire family of a suspected Covid-19 patient and getting the entire area surrounding the

proper treatment was denied in many cases. The first Covid-19 patients and their family members were inundated with hate messages and social-shaming. The exacerbation of social shaming is leading people to hide their symptoms from the health professionals as well as neighbours.

Despite the IEDCR's repetitive denial of the transmission of Covid-19 at a community level, it keeps requesting people to contact their hotline numbers if they have any symptom of the coronavirus. However, people keep complaining that they are not being able to get through the hotline.

The way the state is handling the pandemic is fuelling the stigma and xenophobia in society. And as we write this piece, we came across the news of a local hotel in Sylhet kicking out an international guest with Covid-19 symptoms, who lied in the street for a while before a rescue team took him to the Sylhet MAG Osmani Medical College Hospital.

In regular press briefings, the IEDCR director states that they cannot reveal the identities of the deceased as they may face social harassment—while it would be just enough to say that it is because of medical ethics. All the claims made by netizens in social media about their severe lack of preparation in handling an epidemic of this magnitude fall into places, thanks to the ceaseless attempts to sweep their shortcomings under the carpet.

When one of us asked our domestic help to take a break during the lockdown, she replied with gloomy eyes, "Why? I do not have that *kharap rog*." It makes us wonder how the coronavirus is gradually becoming a *kharap rog* and how we are collectively contributing to the social manifestation of this disease. It is high time that we addressed these social issues. It is because of such stigma and sometimes xenophobic behaviour that an Indian citizen of Chinese descent, who has never been to China, had to stand in front of his vandalised laundry store with a placard claiming, "I have never been to China!"

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A group of Italy-returnees stage a protest inside the Ashkona Hajj Camp after they were quarantined there upon their return, on March 14, 2020.


FILE PHOTO: COLLECTED

hospitals are denying patients with flu, cough, sneezing, breathing problems and other symptoms which are common in a Covid-19 case because they are not at all equipped to provide treatments to such patients. Moreover, handling even one patient can lead to the quarantine of the entire hospital along with infecting all the staff and other patients.

A few days ago, a person died at Shivganj, Bagura. He returned home from Gazipur

house locked down. The behaviour of all the residents of that area, including the security guards, changes overnight, even before one is confirmed as a Covid-19 patient. Such stigmatised gaze is getting more intense as citizens countrywide are counting their locked-down days.

Not just in Bangladesh, Covid-19 patients across the world have reportedly suffered from such social stigma and xenophobia, and



QUOTABLE Quote

WILLIAM MORRIS
(Born 1965)
British designer, writer and activist

The true secret of happiness lies in taking a genuine interest in all the details of daily life.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Collections

5 Twosomes

10 Book basis

11 "Li'l Abner" creator

13 Arm bone

14 Kid's wheels

15 Exercise program

17 Period of history

18 Trapper's job

19 Immoral act

20 Soggy

21 Weasel relative

22 Narnia lion

25 Viper's weapons

26 Those folks

27 Lawn material

28 Have lunch

29 Being rude, in a way

33 Onassis nickname

34 Funny

35 Tot tender

37 Stadium event

38 Car part

39 Prayer finish

40 Farm animals

41 Not so much

DOWN

1 San Antonio team

2 TV's DeGeneres

3 Polynesian nation

4 Flight's place

5 Inventor's protection

6 By the way

7 Frozen over

8 Enters quickly

9 Frugal

12 Mischievous acts

16 Bearing

21 Bard's song

22 Relaxed

23 Generous virtue

24 "Frozen" song

25 Latte topping

27 Boutiques

29 Fragrance

30 Start of a Caesar quote

31 New parents' choices

32 Valleys

36 Aunt, in Acapulco


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YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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BETLE BAILEY

by Mort Walker



BABY BLUES

by Kirkman & Scott

