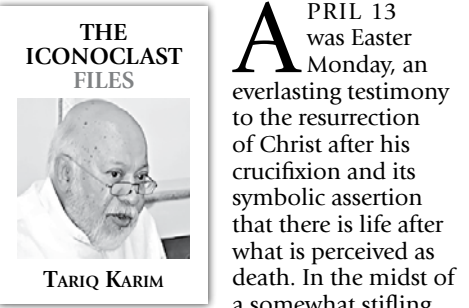


Coping with coronavirus and preparing for a life after it



THE ICONOCLAST FILES

TARIQ KARIM

in fear of the ubiquitously merciless and relentlessly marauding novel coronavirus, somehow the day and its symbolism was comfortingly reassuring.

Yesterday, the IEDCR also officially admitted that we had transitioned to Stage Four of the pandemic. The government has stepped up efforts to contain the spread of the virus as best as humanly possible. The Prime Minister has stepped up to the plate and announced a slew of measures, not only to bring the health services to a modicum of preparedness as the disease steadily marches on, but to put into place social safety nets and measures to offset the unexpected economic fallout, with grim consequences particularly for our huge informal economy; for our masses of daily wage-workers unexpectedly without jobs because most infrastructure activities have ground to a halt; for industrial workers, suddenly laid off with their factories closed because of the lockdown and necessity for physical distancing; for the farmers and workers in the agri-sector where crops and produce have been harvested or are ready for harvesting but cannot be transported to their markets. These are all wise and well-thought out measures, announced none too soon.

How long will this lockdown last? Well, we have been in a sort of “lockdown” that has not quite been a total lockdown. We have been on an extended “public holiday” (a gross misnomer that gave the illusion that people could afford to ignore social distancing from each other, with unhappy, even deadly consequences) since the second half of

March, extended twice to date until April 25. It has been by now almost universally demonstrated that until we find a vaccine (that could take 18 months at least), the only effective way of stopping the advance of this virus is by effectively sealing off, progressively, all avenues and carriers spreading from a confined area or locality. As we have just entered the fourth stage of the pandemic spread, I suspect that now we shall have no option but to extend this quarantining measure and be far stricter—perhaps even with draconian measures—in enforcing it. This is a challenging task, because how do homeless people stay quarantined at “home”? How, or where, do daily wage earners without wages earn money to buy daily essentials to survive? How do the hungry go out, and where, to forage, beg, or somehow get something, anything, to eat?

History teaches us that a pandemic like this, the last being the so-called Spanish Flu, comes in waves. We must expect and be prepared for a second wave that could be more virulent than the first if we let our guards down. Just as you cannot forestall the successive wave and dynamics of a mega-tsunami, you cannot wish the second wave away. So, there are, and will be, complex and difficult questions for the government. The answers to all those would require carefully weighed in, politically mature and sagaciously balanced decisions.

In my humble view, and I hope to God I am woefully wrong, we appear to be still worryingly unprepared, as much for the disease as for the socioeconomic fallouts that will very likely impact politics as well. The real test will come in the ability to implement wisely the policies that have been announced. I am neither an economist by training, nor a policymaker now by vocation—just an ordinary but concerned citizen, ignorant of much, not privy to many things. I have no desire to try and be Monday-morning quarterback here. But I dare venture, from my hole of ignorance and well of idleness, to share a few thoughts, hesitantly venture a few suggestions, for whatever they are worth. At the very least, they will help me get a few things off my chest!

These are extraordinary times and call for extraordinary measures. Without a shot being fired or a missile launched by any state against any other, the entire world today is assuredly engaged in a global war more massive and widely embracing than either of the previous two World Wars. Let us not mince words: we are, all of us, fighting World War III, now, today. Our common enemy is this novel coronavirus, which has displayed the ability to jump from bat to mammal to humans, mutated with each jump to adapt and multiply in its new host. It has hopped across regions, oceans and continents, mutating into several varieties (three to date), adapting to each new host environment. It has been several steps ahead of our human efforts and capabilities (to date) to out-think us and out-match our fire power.

Perhaps governments will now, necessarily, have to be cruel to be kind to the peoples they govern. They may have to call in the armed forces in massive support of civilian administration, and delegate oversight and enforcement of curtailed movement within strictly defined parameters; requisition all available stocks of food grain in government and private godowns (the latter at fair compensation to millers); arrange setting up of TCB/ration shops (reminiscent of war time eras earlier) and oversee distribution of essential food grains, edible oil, sugar and salt, and even milk, eggs and daily farm and orchard produce, at fixed prices and in rationed quantities per head. Eggs, fresh milk and other perishable produce should be purchased directly from producers at fixed prices in the first place, harnessing the massive logistical capacity of the armed forces to augment the paramilitary and civil administration capacity, requisitioning trucks and buses from the private sector (again at fairly determined compensation), so that farmers and producers have steady incomes and incentives to keep producing. There must be continuous patrolling of all neighbourhoods, because these are also times when desperate or unscrupulous elements may try to take advantage of the situation.

Industrialists and manufactures may be coopted and enlisted, and commissioned into this “wartime effort”, to retool their lines of production to produce essential, life-saving equipment like oxygenating respirators, PPE required by health care personnel and hospitals, lifesaving drugs and such experimental prophylactic drugs as may be currently in use to fight the disease. In normal times, their production could be scaled down, but they could still remain an auxiliary line of export and sale to domestic, regional and global markets. There have been numerous reported cases of people entrusted (and they

enable them to keep their workers on the pay-roll (at reduced wages if necessary, but at incomes deemed necessary for their survival). It is important that a contract be worked out with all factory owners that they too must bear a fair size of the state’s burden, with extraordinary taxes levied for a specified time. In other words, government must govern, judiciously, wisely, for the greater good of all, eschewing the interests of vested-interest groups, in order to enable all to survive, for society to endure and heal, and for social order to remain intact and be resurrected again. Government must at the same time endeavor to protect and reshape contractual obligations between buyer and seller in the global marketplace—which may appear daunting at first sight, but the vulnerability of all countries and governments to the socioeconomic impacts of this pandemic are by now quite starkly evident and felt everywhere. We all have to help and enable each other to survive, whether within the domestic and national sphere, or between peoples in the region, across regions or across the globe.

Restoration of human values, societal discipline and healthy respect for civic responsibilities, privileging them over the current metrics of profit and loss that have been so all-pervasive, needs to be reasserted once more. We need to inculcate an abiding awareness among citizens—through revisiting educational curricula at all levels—of their individual and collective responsibility to society and the ecosystem in which we live, comprising both the natural habitat as well as the manmade industrial add-ons that flow incessantly from man’s ingenuity and ability to create. The new order that we start shaping now must be founded on our acknowledging and respecting that ecological equilibrium needs to be maintained for all its components—humans, other species, flora, fauna and pathogens—to coexist and flourish, and symbiotically nurture each other. The new order shall rise from the ashes of the old.

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SOFIA KARIM

I do not know Kajol. But at a time when coronavirus has casts its web over the world, his story has found its way into my art through the obscurest of routes: a *shingara thonga* made by my seven year old daughter.

Last month, sitting at home with her in London, I read the story of Kajol’s case in the news. It troubled me deeply: On March 10, the day after police filed a case against him under the notorious Digital Security Act, journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol left his office but never arrived home. CCTV footage released by Amnesty International shows unknown men moving about Kajol’s motorbike whilst he is in his office. They appear to tamper with it. Within three hours of Kajol’s last CCTV sighting, as he leaves the office on this motorbike, police filed a second case against him under the same Digital Security Act. Where is Kajol?

I kept turning his story around in my mind. I wondered about his family. How would Covid-19 impact Kajol’s case? The virus would surely steal attention away from it. Starve it of oxygen as it starves the lungs.

Lockdown malaise was setting in and my daughter was restless—self isolation is a bizarre concept for a seven year old. I was several months into organising a joint artists’ protest at Tate Modern museum in London. Artists, writers, poets and thinkers from across the world were creating *samosa* packets (*shingara thonga*) for “Turbine Bagh”, a demonstration against fascism in India. For a period of one day, the cathedral like space of the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern, one of the world’s most prominent art spaces, would be

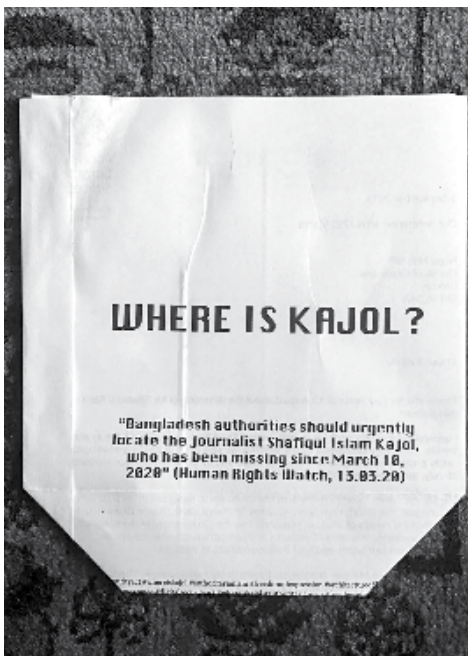
our Shaheen Bagh, our garden.

It was in that vast, humming engine room that I had staged a protest for my jailed uncle, the photographer Shahidul Alam in 2018. We laid his “Crossfire” series of photographs on extrajudicial killings in Bangladesh across the museum floor. Now, for Turbine Bagh, we would display our *shingara thonga* within a large rice circle, around which we would sing protest songs and read poems in solidarity with the mass resistance in India.

Why *shingara thonga* as a symbol for nonviolent resistance? The thread of the story winds back to Dhaka, February 2018 and a Dhanmondi street corner—before Kajol, before corona, before Free Shahidul, or Shaheen Bagh. For it was here that I bought a handful of *shingara* for my mother and I to share, and noticed that the packet was made from lists of court hearings; cases between citizens and the state. Entranced by this packet, I began to collect more. Constructed from throwaway papers—letters, corporate emails, official documents, kids’ homework, poems, news, and court lists—collectively they painted an insightful portrait of a country.

Would my mama’s case ever appear on a *shingara thonga*? When in August 2018 he was jailed after reporting on student protests, I began making my own, charting the stories of the Free Shahidul campaign that had spread across the globe. And somehow a *samosa* packet movement was born.

Was there a way to support Kajol through Turbine Bagh? As Covid-19 extended its grip on the globe, mass gatherings were banned and museums closed. We knew our physical event at Tate Modern would be postponed, but it didn’t matter. Turbine Bagh had become



Shingara Thonga created by Sofia Karim as part of the Turbine Bagh project.

PHOTO: SOFIA KARIM

a movement, a living thing. Grassroots in spirit, embracing emerging artists from India and beyond, it had also gathered support from figures including Sharon Stone, Anish Kapoor, Zehra Dogan, Arundhati Roy, Akram Khan, Vijay Prashad and Amitav Ghosh. Now it ran on its own momentum.

“Let’s make a Turbine Bagh *shingara thonga* for Kajol,” I proposed to my daughter. She jumped into action.

Children are perhaps my favourite allies. The hardening of attitude so prevalent in adults, is rare in them. Their courage has a distinct potency, as if it comes from the supernatural realm (the same place their fears come from).

So we made our “Where is Kajol?” *shingara thonga*, and put images of it onto social media. I did not foresee that Kajol’s son would stumble upon the post but when he did, my daughter was both happy and unsurprised. She’d never doubted that an action would lead to a result. It is adults who are the cynics. It is adults who will tell you that resistance is futile.

Even my daughter can sense that there is nothing futile about resistance. Because resistance is a measure of dignity. It is nothing to do with profit or loss. Those who resist dignify those they fight for. And in doing so, they dignify humankind.

After seeing the *shingara thonga* post, many artists on the Turbine Bagh platform, from India and beyond, emailed the government of Bangladesh about Kajol. During a global pandemic, they took the time to support an unknown family from another country.

The fact that (to my knowledge) not a single person has yet received a response from the Bangladesh authorities, is telling. That is a measure of shame and immense cowardice.

The letter Polok Monorom has written to his father Kajol, published in *The Daily Star*, is a haunting thing. The desperation of the family’s situation, the chilling sense of being watched, and the terrifying paralysis of lockdown impeding the search for one’s father, are shocking.

But what is more astonishing is Polok’s strength. It takes courage from the

supernatural realm to fight the monster that he fights. He enters the labyrinth of paranoia alone, armed with weapons of love, a son’s infinite resolve to rescue his father and the belief that he is still alive and will return.

Polok survives on hope. But it is also up to us to make that hope real. If everyone reading this spoke out, or took four minutes to send an email as the Turbine Bagh artists did, perhaps Kajol could return to his family. Had we spoken out each and every time prior, things would never have gotten to this stage. Silence nourishes well the poisonous flower of abuse.

Some might know Kajol’s fate. They might know his condition, keeping it from his family as a means to torment. To treat another human being this way is to have lost control, be it on a personal or a state level. There is opportunity for redemption still and it is in Kajol’s captors’ hands. We ask that they, and anyone reading these words heed Polok Monorom’s appeal: “Everyday I hear my father’s footsteps and wait to catch a glimpse of his voice, maybe you’re also wondering about my father. We can find my father with your help. Even from afar, I know you want what’s best, which is my father’s return... Let’s come together from near and far, in times of corona, with strength in our hearts to live and die. With love and prayers, Monorom Polok, April 9, 2020, Dhaka, Bangladesh.”

Sofia Karim is an architect and visual artist based in London, UK.

If you wish to write to the government of Bangladesh about Kajol, some guidance is provided by Amnesty International via the following link, or of course, you can write words of your own. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa13/2065/2020/en/>

QUOTABLE
Quote

NELSON MANDELA
(1918-2013)
President of South Africa.

I learned that courage was not the absence of fear, but the triumph over it. The brave man is not he who does not feel afraid, but he who conquers that fear.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS
1 Canary homes
6 Hayride need
11 Love to pieces
12 Make amends
13 Concise
14 Gander's mate
15 TV's Danson
16 Turned over
18 Stretch of years
19 Chapel sight
20 Porker place
21 Field workers
23 Fancy dink
25 Road gus
27 Farm butter
28 Produce
30 Cell feature
33 Sedan or SUV
34 Espionage org.

DOWN
1 Chair wheel
2 Stick
3 Post-lunch greeting
4 Mess up
5 Party prep
6 Go into combat
7 Heaps

ACROSS
26 Gym unit
27 Rampage
29 Bar rocks
40 In the area
41 Relay stick
43 In the area
44 Oscar or Tony
45 Superman's adoptive family
46 Watches over

DOWN
8 Helper of parable
9 Starts
10 Poor
17 Coat rack part
22 Slump
24 Chemist's place
26 Speaks from memory
28 Shiny trifle
29 Uncle, in Acapulco
31 Athlete's dream
32 Shells out
33 Liberty Bell feature
35 Chance to swing
38 Sign of disuse
42 Stunned wonder

WRITE FOR US. SEND US YOUR OPINION PIECES TO dsopinion@gmail.com.

YESTERDAY'S ANSWERS

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BEEBLE BAILEY
BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES
BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT