

It is five in the afternoon, on an ordinary weekday.

The workers of Essential Drugs Company Limited (EDCL), a state-owned pharmaceuticals company, are leaving their work stations to head home. Amidst the outpour of workers, an aged woman is seen leading a young man with a cane. Once they reach the nearest intersection, she seems uncertain as to how to cross the road with her visually impaired attendee during rush hour. They wait for nearly 15 minutes till traffic slows down. The young man follows the woman, presumably his mother, like a child.

This story could have been completely different. The young man, after all, had not been born with a visual impairment. Upto a few months ago, he was the one taking care of his elderly mother and providing for his family. But his sight was irreparably damaged when the police lobbed tear gas canisters during a demonstration in Shahbagh held by the students of seven colleges affiliated with the University of Dhaka on July 20 last year. The name of this 24-year-old youth, as most of us know already, is Siddikur Rahman, a student of Government Titumir College. At the time, he and the other students were demanding, among other things, that the authorities publish their exam schedule. As fate would have it, it was the first ever protest of his life—and perhaps his last.

Siddikur's 65-year-old mother Solema Akter had high hopes that her meritorious son would be a high-ranking government official after graduating in Political Science from Titumir College. Instead, Siddikur now works as a telephone operator at EDCL, with a salary of BDT 13,000. This is the job that the Health and Family Welfare Minister Mohammad Nasim had promised him, in the aftermath of the blinding when Siddikur was undergoing treatment for his eyes.

Every day, at his office, Siddikur receives numerous calls. Initially, he was worried he would not be able to perform his tasks of making calls or transferring calls to different departments. Over a few months, he practised these tasks and developed strategies in order to do his work to the best of his abilities. "I have memorised some important phone numbers to which I need to make frequent calls. If there is an emergency and I need assistance, my colleagues are always there to help. This is something really appreciable," shares Siddikur.

Earlier, Siddikur lived in Mohakhali with his nephew but it became difficult to commute to work from there. "The bus drivers were not very willing to pick me up or drop me, as I need more time compared to a normal passenger. Also, not having learnt how to cope with blindness from childhood, I also find commuting challenging," says Siddikur. From November, in order to bring a little comfort to his life, he rented a shared room with a family at Modhho Begunbari, which is a 15-minute walk from his office. For this small room on the ground-floor with no windows or ventilation, Siddikur pays BDT 6,500, in addition to utility bills. Left with only



Siddikur Rahman

PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

## COPING WITH INJUSTICE

### How is Siddikur now?

NILIMA JAHAN

half of his salary, it is often difficult to sustain the monthly expenses of mother and son.

Siddikur's mother currently takes him to the office everyday and looks after him. "I had never come to Dhaka before Siddikur got injured. I don't know anyone here. I don't know the roads properly. But, our fate has sent us here," says Solema Akter.

"Siddikur's father died when he was three. I struggled a lot with my daughter and two sons. My daughter was married off at an early age. I alone couldn't continue the study expenditures of my elder son, who currently works as a construction labourer. Since everyone knew about Siddikur's merit, and his teachers would also admire him, I had a profound belief that one day, my Siddikur would do something very big," says Akter. "But, what is lotted, cannot be blotted. We are trying to accept the harsh reality of our life," she sighs, wiping a tear off her cheek.

Is Siddikur destined to be a telephone operator for the rest of his life? "On July 19, the day before we went to the demonstration, I got admitted to a coaching centre at Uttara to develop my English skills for the Bangladesh Civil Service (BCS) examination. I had also bought numerous practice books to

prepare for the exam. Who then knew that I would lose my eyesight on the following day?"

Siddikur used to run seasonal businesses during the two Eids. In January every year, he would take orders from different schools and colleges to produce ties and shoulder badges for school uniform. "The small profit I would make from these two businesses was enough to cover my living expenses for the whole year," he explains.

A ray of hope is that Siddikur was able to attend his third-year final examination last month—for which he had gone to the demonstrations on that fateful day. In preparation, his nephew Selim would read out loud from his books and Siddikur would listen intently. "Sometimes, I would also record these sessions on my phone to practise later," he says. A second-year student named Sadia Islam Mumu of the same college came forward to assist him as a scribe. "During the exams, I would note down some points but mostly dictate to her the analytical part. Though I'm hopeful, I am not very confident, since I don't even know what was written down on the script, as she is not from my department," Siddikur laughs. "Yet, I'm very grateful to Sadia and my teachers, who were always by my side and helped me to deal with the entire crisis."

Siddikur also informs that he was told by the Health Minister that if he can complete his graduation, he might get promoted later.

Though the government's good

gesture is undoubtedly appreciable, many are wondering what has happened to those policemen who were responsible for Siddikur's misfortune. According to Md Asaduzzaman Mia, Dhaka Metropolitan Police Commissioner, "The probe report into the incident has highlighted the negligence and unprofessionalism of four policemen who were dealing with that unlawful assembly." However, how a peaceful protest demanding educational rights can be constituted as "unlawful assembly" remains unclear.

It is unclear what punishment, if any, the negligent policemen have received. Md Asaduzzaman claims, "They have all been punished according to the Armed Forces Ordinance Act, 1942, but it cannot be revealed to the media nor is there any way of making it public, as it spreads anger among the forces."

But how will others learn not to repeat such actions if they continue to think they can get away with it? "I can assure you that such negligence and carelessness is dealt with due attention within the armed forces, as it hampers our chain of command. No one is given any privileges after a wrongdoing," he replies.

There is little hope at this point that Siddikur will see again—the doctors have informed him both of his retinas were disorganised and there is no treatment unless new technology emerges.

"The dreams I would always cherish have faded away with the passage of time. But I'm not depressed anymore. Days are passing; my mother is here for me, and now the only urge I feel is to survive," he concludes. ■

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#### ENFORCED DISAPPEARANCES

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When Jahiruddin, a retired constable who worked for the police for more than four decades, tried to file a case at the police station, he was denied. As a result, he filed a case at the Judicial Magistrate Court, after which the Police Bureau of Investigation (PBI) was asked to investigate the matter. According to PBI's report, they found some "valuable information" regarding Faruk's disappearance. However, nothing more was revealed.

A frustrated Jahiruddin, who left no stones unturned to find his son, does not know what step to take next. "I still don't know where my son is. There is barely any progress on the case. All the authorities keep telling me is to be patient. My son has been missing for six months now; how can you expect me to be patient?" asks Jahiruddin.

"I am really tense about the state of my family. I am afraid that my wife and my children may have a breakdown any time. They are all depressed and they haven't eaten properly for the last six months. I have lost one son, I don't want to lose anybody else," laments the 67-year-old. Jahiruddin's hopes had risen for a brief period towards the end of December last year when a host of missing people were returning home. However, the false hope ended up making him feel worse.

While the past abductions mainly involved political leaders, 2017, for the first time, saw individuals disappear from a wide array of circles—from teachers to journalists to doctors.

Like Jahiruddin's, there are hundreds of families—most of whom lost their relatives between 2013 to 2016—who have no clue as to the whereabouts of their missing relatives. To be more precise, according to ASK, around 519 people have allegedly fallen victim to enforced disappearances between 2010 and 2017, with 329 of them still missing. One can only imagine the heartwrenching situation of those who have been away from their loved ones for years.

Ferdousi Rahman, sister of BNP leader Sajedul Islam Sumon, who was allegedly picked up by law enforcers in 2013, best describes the situation. "If the families of the recent victims have suffered for three or four months, we have suffered for more than a thousand nights and it's only going to continue. Trust me when I say this. It's not humanely possible to bear this pain."

According to Ferdousi, Sumon and four of his friends were picked up by individuals who identified themselves as RAB from Bashundhara on December 4, 2013. RAB, however, denied the allegation a number of times.

"When my brother and his friends were getting ready to return home, three vehicles came in and hastily stopped them. They were first beaten very badly with metal pipes and then all five of them were forced into the car. We haven't seen any of them since. We came to know about all of this from the labourers who were present at the construction site over there," she explains.

"What makes me really frustrated is that it has been so many years since my brother disappeared, but the law enforcers have not even begun the process of finding him," she adds.

Over the last four years, Ferdousi's family used up all their contacts in a bid to trace Sumon. They went to the police, they visited RAB headquarters and even went to court. According to Ferdousi, her mother ran to-and-fro the offices of various law enforcement agencies every week for the first three years.

"Do you know what my mother tells the watchman time and again? She says 'If you see a madman, or a beggar approaching the house, don't yell at him or ask him to leave. Call me first. That might be my son,'" a teary-eyed Ferdousi says.

The case of Moklesur Rahman Johnny, a homeopath who went missing on August 4, 2016 in Satkhira, is even more astounding, primarily because Johnny's



“There were never any cases filed against him. He wasn't a terrorist. But today, I don't know where he is. If he was dead, I would have at least arranged prayers for him, but I can't even do that.”

wife, Jesmin Nahar, actually met him after he was abducted.

Upon finding Johnny's phone switched off, Jesmin looked for her husband in various police stations in Satkhira and eventually found him at a thana. She was even allowed to bring her husband food and was in touch with him for the next three days.

After three days though, her husband "disappeared". To her shock, the officer-in-charge of the thana actually denied arresting her husband in the first place. Desperate for justice, a three-months-pregnant Jesmin filed a writ petition with the High Court, which prompted the court to order the Chief Judicial Magistrate of Satkhira to investigate the case.

According to the Magistrate's report, which was submitted July last year, Jesmin's husband was, in fact, present in the station. It was a big win for Jesmin and her family. After that, the court directed the PBI to investigate the case and submit the report by October 3. However, the PBI did not submit any report. Instead, they were given a three-month extension.

In order to reach this position though, Jesmin has had to overcome a myriad of obstacles in the last 15 months. She has had to run to-and-fro her home in Satkhira and the High Court in Dhaka for the first six months, all while she was pregnant.

Her father-in-law suffered multiple strokes due to the tension, while her mother-in-law recently had a car accident. Johnny was the sole earner in the family. With him gone, the family has been living off their relatives for the last 15 months.

Despite all the sufferings though, Jesmin believes that it will all be worth it "when" her husband is "released". "We are still hopeful. He is not into politics. He did not do anything bad either. We honestly believe that the people who have him held will soon realise that it was all a mistake and let him go," a hopeful Jesmin says.

A majority of the families who have lost someone have not been as lucky as Jesmin, as far as the progress of the case is concerned. Many families allege that they were not even allowed to file cases at the police station.

Human rights activist Nur Khan Liton believes that cases should be filed for each of these incidents, regardless of the support that the family receives.

"At least if the cases are accepted and a final report is given, then the incident will be recorded, and one day in the future, when the situation of the country is better, there will be a chance for these families to get justice," says Nur.

On December 10 this year, relatives of victims of disappearance took part in a demonstration at the press club in Dhaka. With 27 families participating in the programme this year, it was the biggest turnout till date.

57-year-old business man Shafiqur Rahman was one such father who had attended the programme. His son Saifur Rahman Shojib, went missing on February 18, 2015. Ever since then, Shafiqur and his wife have been struggling to cope both mentally and professionally. "I used to have a decent rent-a-car

business. After I lost my son, I couldn't concentrate on anything. I used to run from one place to another hoping to get some news about him," says Shafiqur.

After two years of suffering losses, Shafiqur eventually shut down his business and made some small investments instead, which help his wife and him stay afloat today. Shafiqur claims that some of his sources had given him a rough idea about the whereabouts of his son and that he managed to track him for six months. However, after half-a-year, he had lost all trace.

"People will say that my son was at fault, because he was involved in politics. Is it a crime to be involved in politics? There were never any cases filed against him. He wasn't a terrorist. But today, I don't know where he is. If he was dead, I would have at least arranged prayers for him, but I can't even do that," exclaims Shafiqur.

"Everything is in disarray. I am

talking to you right now and I am sure that I won't be able to sleep at night because I will be thinking about my son. I have a grandson who I have to lie to everyday. I have a daughter-in-law, who despite being in her 20s, has decided not to marry again. There are so many things that I need to fix," says a teary-eyed Shafiqur.

Recent statements made by the government paints a bleak picture as far as the fate of these families are concerned. Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina, while responding to a question related to enforced disappearances, claimed that such occurrences were more frequent in Western countries, such as the United Kingdom. Rights activists criticised the premier for her statement, arguing that in saying so she had actually indirectly justified the incidents.

While the return of the individuals at the brink of the end of 2017 is good news, one must not forget that there are still many more individuals who are missing. And one also can't ignore the fact that despite the nonchalant attitude of the government, the families still have a flicker of hope.

Shafiqur's statement perhaps best sums up the kind of belief and hope that these families have been living on. "My son has been missing for two years. That's a long time. But I know one of his friends from Badda who had been missing for 16 months and he returned home one fine day. If he can return, why can't my son? I still don't believe he is dead."