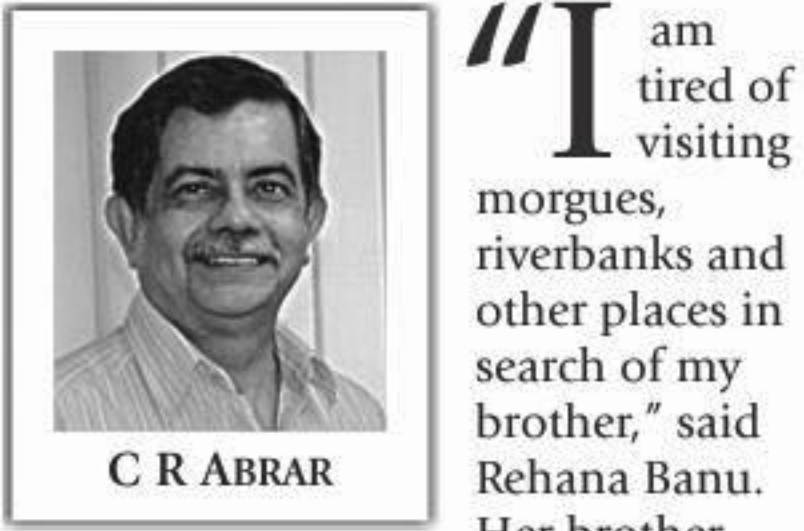


INVOLUNTARY DISAPPEARANCE, IMPUNITY AND INJUSTICE

Still waiting for the bell to ring



C R ABRAR

I am tired of visiting morgues, riverbanks and other places in search of my brother," said Rehana Banu. Her brother Pintu, an opposition activist, was picked up allegedly by plainclothes law enforcers from Pallabi on December 11, 2013. Pintu remains untraced.

Holding her minor daughter in her lap, Shumi Akhter of Chittagong had a different story to tell. Her husband Nurul Alam, also a political activist, was picked up by uniformed and plainclothes men around midnight on March 29 last year. "We thought my husband was taken to the police station and the police would send him to court the next morning... Around 4am we came to know that his body was floating on the Karnaphuli river, with his hands tied," narrated Shumi in a choked voice.

In another case, a father from Jhenaidah informed that he was able to meet his son in police custody. Subsequently, the police denied he was in their custody. With his meagre means he left no stone unturned to secure information about his missing son, of no avail.

These are a few narratives of the near and dear ones of victims of involuntary disappearance at an event organised by "Mayer Dak" (Mother's Call), an organisation of the families of the disappeared, a little over a fortnight ago in the city. More than 80 families joined the event and about a score of heart-wrenching

testimonies were presented. Though the families came from different parts of the country, representing a diverse range of trades and professions, and the incidents took place over a stretch of several years, a set of patterns emerges from the narratives.

In most cases victims were young political activists belonging to opposition political parties or their front organisations. In one instance a member of the student wing of the ruling party was the victim. Most families claimed that their loved ones were innocent and no case was ever lodged against them. In many cases the victims were picked up from their own homes or those of their relatives, either at night or in the very early hours of the day, and those who came to pick up introduced themselves as members of law enforcement agencies (LEAs), while in some cases those persons donned

Members of the families who remain traceless continue to remain in a suspended condition. They have no scope to observe the day when their loved ones had departed.

uniforms of LEAs. Interestingly, no case has been reported in which the victims were presented with a warrant, nor the alleged enforcers of the law furnished any identification documents. In most instances families or eyewitnesses reported that perpetrators used black-tinted white vans (microbuses), while in some instances they used clearly marked vehicles of a particular LEA.

After the involuntary disappearance, in all cases, family members contacted local police stations or Rapid Action Battalion offices or local public representatives, and in some cases members of parliament and ministers, but no information about the whereabouts and condition of the disappeared was ever made available to them. Most frustrating has been the refusal of the authorities to register complaints of involuntary disappearance. A case was cited where the family furnished names not only of the alleged agency involved but also of the concerned functionaries with their ranks. The police refused to take the complaint, according to these families. It was only after those specific details were taken off that the complaint was noted they have alleged.

The affected families were in unison to express their disappointment that no progress had taken place in the investigation in any of these cases. In a few instances families were threatened with consequences if they pushed the cases further.

Topping all was the case of Mohammad Shahnur Alam. He died on May 6 in Brahmanbaria Sadar Hospital. His family brought allegations of torture against members of a LEA and filed a

petition in the magistrate's court. Najmun Nahar, magistrate of Brahmanbaria, on June 6, 2014 instructed the police to treat the complaint filed by Shahnur's family as the First Information Report. Within 24 hours she was stripped off her *bicharik khomota* (judicial authority). On June 7, the Judge's Court of Brahmanbaria ordered an "investigation for an FIR."

Demanding restoration of the original order Shahnur's family filed a writ in the High Court on July 6. In at least two instances, after a lot of hurdles the families filed writ petitions and the Court instructed agencies to produce the individuals concerned. The matter remains pending for a long period of time.

The similarities in the sequence of events and the reported responses and actions of the members of the LEAs in the testimonies raise some important questions. Firstly, how is it possible for groups of rogue elements to abduct individuals, often donning uniforms and using clearly marked vehicles of recognised LEAs of the country? Secondly, why is it that the victims are mostly dissidents or members of the organisations affiliated with the political opposition? Thirdly, why is it that local police stations refuse to entertain complaints of involuntary disappearance and are adamant in rejecting complaints if they contain specific details of the alleged perpetrators? Fourthly, in cases where complaints are accepted, what precludes the law enforcers from investigating them properly and fairly? Fifthly, why, in certain cases, have members of victims' families alleged to have been kept in surveillance and threatened with

severe consequences? And finally, why was the magistrate of Brahmanbaria summarily transferred and why does the higher judiciary appear to be reticent in disposing of these important petitions? All these questions beg response from those who are at the helm of law enforcement and dispensation of justice.

The distressed families drew attention of the highest office of the land to their plight. Deeply appreciating the intervention in the case involving the husband of a prominent environmental activist, they urged the prime minister to order investigation and ensure justice in all cases of involuntary disappearance with the compassion and sincerity as she did in the case concerned. They reminded the high-ups in the LEAs that the latter are duty-bound to protect every individual irrespective of their political opinion or social status and all have the right to live and die in dignity. They further reminded the wrongdoers that in the recent past, under the initiative of this government, indemnity to protect perpetrators of certain crimes has been rescinded paving the way for bringing perpetrators to justice even after decades. The aggrieved members of victims' families expressed their resolve that days of impunity are over and one day perpetrators of involuntary disappearances will also be held accountable in the same way.

Still retaining unflinching hope that their loved ones are alive, members of the families demanded their immediate return. Eight-year-old Hridi refuses to hold her disappeared father's photo anymore. Her plea: "I want to walk around holding my dad's hand." The families that have resigned to the notion that their loved ones are not likely to return want to know the details about what happened to them. Munna's father's last wish was if the state failed to bring back his son, it should at least show him where he was put to rest. His desire remained unfulfilled as he passed away a year ago. The expectation to embrace one day his disappeared brother Shahnur appears to have faded from Mehdi Hasan's mind. Now Mehdi only wants to know why Shahnur was brutally killed after being disappeared. "If I at least get an answer, I would think I have got enough justice. I don't want anything more," he informed the audience.

The loaded testimonies conveyed the message that families of the involuntary disappeared are worse off than those whose bodies were eventually found. The families of the latter had their closure with the last rites performed, religious ceremonies held, resting places identified, and inheritance and pension issues settled. Members of the families who remain traceless continue to remain in a suspended condition. They have no scope to observe the day when their loved ones had departed. Years pass by, wives do not know if they are widows now and children unaware if they are orphans.

Shujon's mother remains resolute in her hope that one day her son will be back and ring the door bell. She says she has run out of tears, but is eagerly waiting for that day to dawn. One hopes that day is not too far away.

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It takes a community to raise a STEM-girl



ANDREA DELLA MATTEA

EVERY day when I get to the office, I meet so many amazing, talented people. We brainstorm problems together, we strategise and pursue opportunities together, we go through the ups and downs of our work together. When I take a step back and reflect on the number of women alongside me in the work we do, it fills my heart with pride. As a woman, I see that we've come a long way.

I remember one of my first jobs. It was in a large sugar refinery filled with heavy machinery and processing equipment in Queensland, Australia. Out of more than 100 employees, I stood out as one of the few female employees, let alone a female engineer. That feeling of standing out wasn't unfamiliar. There weren't many women pursuing an engineering degree when I was in university. This was not always the case. Women once dominated the fields of science, technology, engineering and mathematics—or STEM for short. The computing industry had Ada Lovelace, the first programmer; science had Marie Curie, the first woman to win a Nobel Prize, and only woman to do so twice; mathematics had Katherine Johnson, the African-American mathematician whose calculations were critical to the success of the first American human spaceflights—the list goes on.

So perhaps we've come a long way,

but I feel certainly not far enough.

Today, Unesco reports that only 23 percent of researchers in East Asia and the Pacific are women and only 35 percent of all students enrolled in STEM-related fields of study are female. Microsoft's "Closing the STEM Gap" report shared that girls today are losing interest in STEM because they believe that jobs requiring coding and programming aren't for them. Another study found that 50 percent of teenage girls surveyed in Asia Pacific are less likely to pursue STEM careers because of strong male presence.

How do we change this, to go the distance?

Inspire and influence her: be a role model

Reflecting on my earlier career, I was extremely fortunate to have some incredibly capable and influential leaders who were great role models and played an integral part in my success. Likewise, the first step we can take to help mould future women leaders in STEM is to showcase and make accessible, positive female role models. Girls and young women who know a woman in STEM professions are substantially more likely to feel empowered when they engage in education and career-affirming activities.

DigiGirlz, one of Microsoft YouthSpark's programme, gives young girls opportunities to explore careers in technology, connect with Microsoft employees, and participate in hands-on digital learning workshops. Microsoft employees across Asia have been reaching out to girls in their alma mater as part of our DigiGirlz



Inspiring role models and teachers can play a crucial role in encouraging girls to study STEM subjects from an early age.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

School Connect programme. They share with students their career stories, the exciting innovations in technology—all while busting the myths and misconceptions of STEM careers. On International Women's Day in March, more than 4,400 young women took part in 56 DigiGirlz type events across 24 cities in Asia.

Ignite her passion: support the educators

The first exposure girls have to STEM is in the classroom and our teachers

are often the reason most of us fell in love with what we learn in class. I've had amazing teachers over the years who piqued my interest in learning how things work and solving problems, imbuing in me an innate sense of curiosity that inspired me to study in engineering.

This is why I passionately believe that educators play an irrefutable role in driving students' joy for STEM. We need to ensure that educators receive all the support they can get to do their jobs the best they can in preparing our future leaders for

success in their digital economy and to cement their desire to embrace a STEM-related career.

Through our Microsoft Innovative Educator (MIE) programme, we recognise the power of educators and provide the tools, knowledge and the community for educators to come together and use technology to pave the way for better learning and student outcomes.

Help her thrive: inculcating a growth mindset

I cannot begin to share the different

hurdles that stand between you and success, let alone the challenges that come with being in STEM. Experiments fail, projects delay—from one day to the next the field of STEM will never cease to challenge you. But I promise, it is rewarding.

So, beyond the role models and the education, success in STEM lies also in having a growth mindset—one that is focused on continual learning and improvement, through a willingness to try, fail and inquire. At Microsoft, we know there is a need for a supportive environment where failure is not shunned, but instead learning-it-all is celebrated. The same goes to nurturing our future female leaders. Instilling this growth mindset by emphasising more on the journey to seek out answers and the need for hard work, will help girls go further in STEM.

Answer the call

As a mother, I know that supporting and guiding children are key to their success. As a woman, I know that the support I've received from amazing men and women has been vital to my career. As a leader, I know that the responsibility lies on me to lead the charge in making sure our industry is accessible to all.

In the spirit of International Girls in ICT Day, which was observed on April 26, I invite you to answer the call and join me in paying it forward, for the thousands of girls out there. After all, we can't do it alone, it takes a community.

Andrea Della Mattea is the president of Microsoft Asia Pacific.

QUOTABLE Quote

CHARLES CALEB COLTON (1780-1832)
English cleric, writer and collector

When we feel a strong desire to thrust our advice upon others, it is usually because we suspect their weakness; but we ought rather to suspect our own.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

1 Fair	34 Walk unevenly	16 Calendar box
5 Depth charge, in slang	35 Brood watcher	18 Land in the sea
11 Not fooled by	38 On the go	19 Slam on the brakes
12 Cube face	41 Physique	20 Ring out
13 Order to Spot	42 Comely one	21 Wheel connector
14 Castle part	43 Spur on	22 Pageantry
15 Long time	44 Feeling friendless	23 Opera feature
16 Slimming plan	45 Proofing note	25 Miles off
17 Goddess of the hunt	DOWN	29 Rotate
19 Place to relax	1 Tenor Carreras	30 Travel aid
22 Singer Cline	2 Golden Rule	33 Abrasive powder
24 Paint base	3 Be proud	34 Prefer
26 Spoken	4 Gift from Santa	36 Advantage
27 Young horse	5 Sean of "Rudy"	37 Russian denial
28 Odometer	6 Sound of delight	38 Maximum amount
reading	7 Insulted	39 Dove sound
30 Syrup choice	8 Sedan or SUV	40 Great weight
31 Bud	9 Is for two	41 Tour carrier
32 Puts on	10 Hoop	
	attachment	

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YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

H	A	M	S		M	A	D	A	M
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BEETLE BAILEY BY MORT WALKER

BABY BLUES BY KIRKMAN & SCOTT