

"All I ever wanted was my father to be back home" - Monorom Polok

ZYMA ISLAM

During the 53 days that journalist Shafiqul Islam Kajol spent in enforced disappearance and the additional seven months of imprisonment, the movement for his release was fuelled by the most part by his unrelenting son, activist Monorom Polok. He spoke to *The Daily Star* about how the movement affected him personally.

When your father went missing, you must have been devastated. We can only imagine, but we can never feel what that was like. What were your initial thoughts?

I would hardly see my father during day time in the days before he disappeared. I used to wake up late and he'd be gone by then. On most days, my father would come late from his newspaper office, but it was never later than 10 pm. I would see him over the dinner table or afterwards. Sometimes, we would chat briefly, but on most days, we would not even pass pleasantries.

On the day he disappeared, I came home pretty late and was met at the door by my mother. She told me that both of my father's phones were switched off. I didn't think too much about it. I stayed up for a while, thinking, before I fell asleep, that in the morning I would see him at home and both of us would act like nothing had happened. I would not have asked him why he switched off his phone.



PHOTO: SHEIKH MEHEDI MORSHED

While I was only thinking about how I could find my father alive, all I received was a free masterclass on party politics. I knew by then that this was going to be a long haul.

I did not know anyone apart from my own circle. We are all in our early 20s. I did not have any idea about what to do. Some told me to do things a certain way, while others gave different advice. In the beginning, we could not even file a case at the police station. We needed to go to the court to persuade the police station to take our case.

But then, Amnesty International published the CCTV footage which people tampering with my father's bike and running after him when he left his office on his motorbike that evening.

After seeing the CCTV footage, I decided to start an online protest. Covid-19 was a factor that I needed to consider. I did not know that the online protest would get that much traction from all walks of life and from all around the world so quickly.

I knew I was speaking against a heinous crime, and it made me feel stronger to speak out. I found strength in the words of the people who came holding placards.

You waged a new movement every other week. In the beginning, there were the webinars. Then we had the social media campaign, in which people held up placards saying, Where is Kajol? In between, you conducted more innovative social media campaigns. You surprised and touched everyone around you with your innovation. How did it come to be?

I just did what I thought was the right

thing to do at that very moment. There was no roadmap of what to do. Anything I did, I reconsidered again and again, as I did not want to antagonise anyone. All I ever wanted was my father to be back home alive and in good health. I was afraid that if I crossed a line, they would kill my father. So I did the bare minimum and just begged for my father's life again and again.

The movement became possible because most people I asked for support said yes. I do not know why they came forward for Kajol. One could say that my movement was a selfish one. It was just a son looking for his missing father. But I would argue that "Where is Kajol" became a protest not just for my father, but for others too.

But like most movements in our country, this too could have died entirely before my father could secure bail. I have learned that people will not stay focused for very long if the design of the movement is not up to date and interactive.

I am lucky to have grown up with technology and I understand the power of images. I created a larger-than-life image of my father and people bought it.

But what about someone whose children do not have adequate technological knowledge? Do we really need to be touched so as to be moved for any legitimate cause? I understand how social media works and what clicks and what does not, but that should not be the criteria to free anyone's father. I sometimes wonder why all the people that came forward for my father are not waging the same movement for the next

person?

If a person is missing, we have to do what we can. I am not an activist, neither am I asking anyone to be. It's just that we all are in this together. It feels wrong when a cartoonist is behind bars for over 260 days. What would a society be without creative minds?

I sometimes think I harvested sympathy but was not able to actually create empathy. I guess it's a long walk and one small movement cannot achieve it all. I believe that no one needs to touch anyone's heart to come forward for a just cause. We should come forward, no matter what.

Was it hard? Constantly juggling the media, the legal side, while also grieving?

No. We did not have the time for grieving. For the first 53 days, I was in constant denial that anything could happen to my father who had raised me in his bare arms, kept me close to his chest night after night. I did not know what I would do if anything happened to him. That was something I was determined to never accept at any cost.

I lost nine productive months of my life but at the same time, I got exposed to the most progressive minds of our country and around the globe, but sometimes, I do want to go back to my previous life, to the time when I could just be me and nothing more. Now, when people come to me and ask how I am and how my father is, it feels like I am still in it somehow.

The legal side was a circus. I witnessed first-hand how very prominent national lawyers did not

even understand what was going on. So, I just shut my brain to that side and waited for forgiveness from them for the crime that my father did not commit.

I got huge support from the media, but at the beginning, before my movement, there was a lot of negative chaos. However, soon they also came around and gave me space to generate more content, which helped to offer a clear picture of the whole situation. Even though the media is under constant scrutiny, they could do so much—and they really did.

I am highly disappointed by a few key figures who could have done more, but they either did not or could not write. I reached out to every senior and prominent figures who use social media. Then again, everyone wants to have pillows to sleep on. I heard from my father that jail is not a place in which to spend even a second of one's life. So I do not blame anyone for not speaking out.

Tell me about the day they found your father but put him back in prison. I remember you crying on the phone with me. Did you anticipate the journey you were about to embark on?

When I was going to Jashore I was imagining that I would hold my father's hand on my lap on the way back and after returning home, I would tell my mother and sister, "Look who I got from Jashore!" I could not—his hands were handcuffed behind his back. They hardly told me anything.

Before I met my father in Jashore, I conducted a live video on Facebook to say that I was really happy that my father is alive and asked everyone to pray for us, thinking that that would be the end of our turmoil. But that only lasted for a few hours.

I think I made a mistake going live at that time without knowing the whole case, as a lot of people became relaxed upon finding out that my father was alive. They went back to their own lives. But I needed the people's support at that time more than ever. I noticed and read online the congratulations from so many people because my father was alive. I did not know what to do, I felt helpless, and that's when we had the call with you, as far as I remember.

What challenges lie ahead for you as you battle the three DSA cases and your father's ailing health?

I really do not know. No one knows. We live at the mercy of the unknown at this point. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, economic hardship is not an unknown factor for most Bangladeshis. My father is suffering from PTSD. Every day is different now in our home. Still, we are trying our best. I really hope the people who did this to us will suddenly grow a conscience and withdraw the cases. We do not have anything against anyone. I personally want to move forward and try to get back to my previous life, if that's possible.

The author is Staff Reporter, The Daily Star. Her Twitter handle is @zymaislam.

One could say that my movement was a selfish one. It was just a son looking for his missing father. But I would argue that "Where is Kajol" became a protest not just for my father, but for others too.

But the next day when I woke up and he was not home, I knew what was coming. I felt entirely numb. I felt helpless, but also somehow motivated to find him as soon as possible. I went to Dhaka Medical College Hospital to look for him, in case he was injured and hospitalised. When I came back home empty-handed, I knew that the only reason he was not with us was because he was being forcefully kept apart from his family—nothing else could have made him stay away from us.

How did you muster the energy and the drive to hit the streets and begin your movement?

We contacted everyone we knew. We went to the press club. In just one visit there, I learned so much about the norms and politics that institutions and people practice in our country. People were telling me they would not be able to organise any visible protests like human chains, because of the identities of some of the people helping me.

Students share their concerns over HSC auto-pass results

MAISHA ISLAM MONAMEE

The pandemic has affected all aspects of life but the education system continues to be severely impacted into its second year. With educational institutions shutting down, students have been detached from the learning process and this is believed to hamper their progress in the long run. After months of postponing the HSC examinations, the education ministry gave out auto-pass and award results based on the students' performance in their secondary level public examinations. This will apply to students of SSC and JSC. With university admission tests approaching, these students are worried about their future.

"I was expecting the exam board to shorten the syllabus or reduce the number of questions in order to ensure that the examinees were not exposed to public places for a long period of time," shared Tabassum Irin Zaman, a student of Scholarshome School and College, Sylhet. The education ministry's decision, however—while appreciable—will permanently mark



(Top left to right) Tabassum Irin Zaman, Fahmida Momtaz Rafa and Musharraf Abir Zabin; (Bottom left to right) Tushik Ornee, Adrita Roy, Surjapata Sengupta and Tahzin Munir Arko.

the HSC batch of 2020 as the ones who got "auto-passed." "We are already hearing things like we did nothing to earn this result," shared Fahmida Momtaz Rafa, a student of Mohammadpur Preparatory School and College.

The wait for the examinations amidst the pandemic has also

affected students' mental health. Their productivity has decreased significantly and they found it difficult to concentrate on studies. "I went through constant panic attacks and was worrying about something I could not control," shared Musharraf Abir Zabin, a student of Viqarunnisa Noon

School and College. "Examinations validate learning and this decision could pose enormous challenges for assessing achievement in a way that is both fair and valid.

"Although I am satisfied with my result, I believe that I would have done better by sitting for the examination," Adrita Roy, a student of Dhaka City College, shared.

Her story reflects a portion of the candidates who will now be at a disadvantage, particularly those students who might have picked up their performance after starting college and studying hard for two years. Many others often change their streams after the SSC

examinations—a student who did not perform well in science could have done well in humanities. The prediction-based results will not be an accurate indicator of potential or performance for any of these students.

Yet another challenge awaits them in the near future. Admission tests for public universities are set to begin shortly and this leaves the students with little time to revise. The pandemic has also led to coaching centres being shut down so the students are expected to sit for the examinations without having taken any physical model test. "I am trying my level best to prepare well for my admission tests but being unable to simulate the exam hall through online model tests, I am lacking in confidence," shared Tushik Ornee, a student of Dhaka College.

There have been apprehensions over conducting these large-scale examinations in person but most students prefer the traditional method over online platforms. "Although conducting public university admission tests entails the risk of getting infected, there is no other alternative. Considering

the large number of aspirants, it is best to fairly judge the potential of students. Since everyone from our batch has been auto-passed, we are expecting a tough admission test to filter the students. The higher number of aspirants also adds more competition," said Surjapata Sengupta, a student from Thakurgaon Government College. Tahzin Munir Arko of Notre Dame College added, "I would like to see the admission tests being conducted in the traditional way and could have waited for three to four months, until the vaccination drive was complete."

Being an admission candidate myself, I resonate with the concerns over conducting physical examinations. However, I also understand that virtual examinations are not feasible, considering the connectivity and accessibility of internet services. Amidst all the uncertainty, the best thing to do is stay focused and continue the preparation.

The author is a freelancer who likes reading, planning and scribbling. Write to her at mislammonamee@gmail.com.

Admission tests for public universities are set to begin shortly and this leaves the students with little time to revise.