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QUOTA REFORM PROTESTS

Student protestors share their experiences



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EDITORIAL

There is a certain eeriness in the atmosphere right now, a feeling that is most likely shared by millions of Bangladeshis around the world, especially our student population. What began as peaceful demonstrations seeking reform of an unfair quota system had turned violent at one point. What followed was unmitigated chaos and unrest, the likes of which this country has not seen in a very long time.

At the time of writing, at least 162* lives were lost during the unrest. Among those who passed, many were students, some were people going about their daily lives, and some were watching the situation unfold from their homes. Whether they were a student actively participating in the protest, an innocent passerby, or even a six-year-old child, the violence did not seem to differentiate.

With the violence followed a nation shrouded in darkness – darkness that seemed to extend past the borders that surround our nation, seemingly spreading through the rest of the world. The internet blackout amidst the crisis further added to the nation’s collective dread and fear of not knowing what will happen next.

Even if a sense of normalcy has been promised, it cannot be achieved in the aftermath of everything that has transpired so far. Every passing day is marked with fear, outrage, and even disbelief at the transpiring



PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

events. However, the feelings have been met with an equal measure of suppression, if not greater.

In these times, the feeling of absolute hopelessness has been permeating all of us at large. However, that does not mean we will be lulled by whatever “normalcy” surrounds us.

As a publication that engages in discourse surrounding students and their lives, we want to do our due diligence in not only amplifying their voices but also giving them

a platform to rightfully express their lived experiences and opinions.

This is a publication that believes in holistic education and equal opportunities for all the students of this country, but it also believes wholeheartedly in their right to freely express themselves. Regardless of the amount of investment, promises of progress, and unbridled opportunities, we believe there can be no future without the success and support of the students.

**The actual number could be much higher*

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The student has to be an undergraduate student from a UGC-approved university in Bangladesh.

The student can't represent or be associated with any other media organisation.

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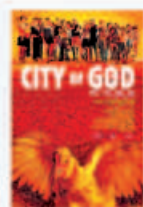
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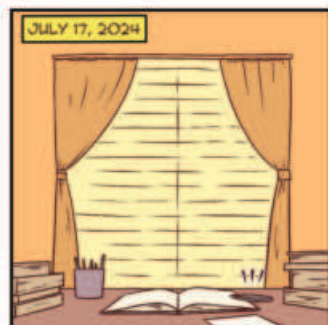
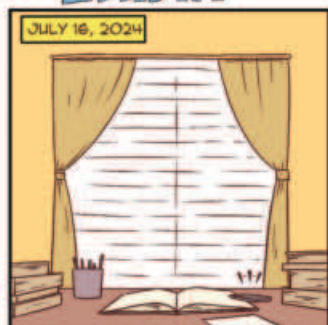


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The Student



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■ OPINION ■

Your comments on **LEAVING THE COUNTRY ARE NOT WELCOME HERE**

RAIAN ABEDIN

In 2018, as a microscopic part of the student protests for road safety, I was told over and over again by sceptics and critics that there was no point in attempting to stand against the status quo. I was chased by strangers and threatened by law enforcement personnel, all with the end result that, at the end of the day, didn't amount to much. Six years later, I am faced with the same world as I attend sites of Quota Reform Protests, the same scenes – of a country under a chokehold and of people who find ways to divert the conversation with one simple line: this is why you should leave the country.

On social media, a discussion around this arose based on a Facebook post made by an international student from Bangladesh. The post depicted a picture of a goon hitting two women with a weapon, and the caption read, "Anybody asks me why did I leave my country? Well here is a reference for you."

In the comments of their post, as many others began to point out how distasteful their comment was, the international student went on to completely ignore them and doubled down on their stance. It is also known that they provide IELTS lessons to Bangladeshi students, thus, many concluded that this was an attempt at furthering their own cause, causing many to infer that students should neglect their cause and essentially, the country, instead of asking for meaningful change.

Unfortunately, this was not an isolated incident. Other institutions that work with students wanting to study abroad were also seen promoting their content. The capitalist greed is blatant, sure, but what's more irksome is everything the statement stands for – the blinding privilege that permeates so many of us.

This issue is not, in any way, specific to this personality on Facebook. Conversations around remaining apolitical and leaving the country to stay away from violence are ever-present in many of our lives. The statement too, in a vacuum, probably doesn't mean much. After all, leaving the country is an outcome desired by many, and for many valid reasons.

But let's also not forget that nothing, not even a social media post, exists inside this hypothetical vacuum. The narrative of leaving the country for something better is sold only by a certain class like a dream, spun into existence the moment a crisis befalls us, but who does this apply to? Based on the economic



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

status of every single one of us, how many can actually afford this dream?

And what happens to this silent majority who are unable to leave? The whole purpose of the quota reformation is to remove the disadvantage faced by many searching for a job or attempting to enter university. Do these people simply rot away because they are unable to find help in a system that works against them?

Logically speaking, if a system causes more harm than good, is it a worthless endeavour to ask for it to be changed? Surely, running away cannot be the only answer in the face of trauma and crisis. If I were to leave today, what would become of every person I have ever loved? Do I take them with me? Can you take an entire country with you when you are leaving it?

It is the task – the responsibility, even – of anyone

with a semblance of power to uphold the rights of those without. So when crisis befalls, why do we suggest escape to those who cannot? Why do we shy away from the idea of 'politics' when so many of us have our entire livelihoods dependent on dealing with said politics? The truth is that blanket responses that solve nothing are easier to hand out than actual solutions, but we still have to try.

I am reminded of the numerous protests I have been laying witness to in the past many months. I have followed the incidents in Palestine, the protests for it across the world, and the many other protests across Africa, Asia, and so many more places. I think of how important it is to stand, to be angry, to let that anger out, and hand it to those misusing their power as you stand by everyone else, united in anger.

I think of this and I wonder, even if I did escape, where would I go?

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QUOTA REFORM PROTESTS

Student protestors share their experiences

CAMPUS MAGAZINE CORRESPONDENTS

Since mid-July, the otherwise peaceful Quota Reform Movement took an unfortunate turn as it got violent. We spoke to students from different public and private universities who participated in the protests and asked about their personal experiences as well as their opinions regarding the newly reformed quota system.

Sanjana*, 4th-year student, Dhaka University (DU)

The government still chose to allot the highest percentage of quotas to the children of freedom fighters. On what basis was one percent for indigenous people and one percent for the disabled and third gender given? Even the protestors didn't ask for so little for those minority groups. The complete abolishment of female quotas will have far-reaching impacts. We got what we wanted, but like 2018, the government once again seems to have skipped making a genuinely well-researched policy that benefits the people. This new quota system feels empty after the deaths of so many.

Anisha*, 4th-year student, DU

On July 15, I was running from the brick chunks being hurled at the students by goons in helmets at DU. I was completely taken aback because we were protesting peacefully. I saw students getting beaten with bamboo

sticks, and I was lucky to be fast enough to get away. What worsened my pain was the silence from the teachers about the attacks on the student. They did not even visit the students at the hospitals after so many days. If I am not safe on my campus, whose fault is that? Now, the 93 percent feels like a consolation prize, which came at a cost that is unimaginable.

Emon*, 4th-year student, DU

I initially wanted to go to Shahid Minar on July 16 because the activities of the day were supposed to be held there. I had to go there through Science Lab, but armed goons in helmets were occupying the area in front of Dhaka College and Nilkhet intersection. There were students of DU, Dhaka College, City College, and Ideal College, among others. The goons were throwing brick chunks at the students from the rooftop of the Teachers Training College to prevent the students from moving forward. When they ran out of bricks to hurl at students, the students began to move forward. The students chased the goons and the goons chased them back. After some time, the goons again started to hurl brick chunks at the students. The students were badly injured; some were bleeding profusely, but they didn't leave. There was a rumour circulating that there had been a death during the protest, but I was not there to see it. Upon returning home, I verified it, and it turned out to be true. The body

was found in a pool of blood near Dhaka College.

Irfan*, 4th-year student, DU

After the absentee funeral on July 17, the students were coming towards Raju Memorial Sculpture in a procession with coffins around 4:30 PM. Just then, law enforcement personnel started firing teargas and sound grenades. I observed one of them hurling teargas and clapping his hands, indicating that if the students were capable of beating them, they were welcome to do so. The students wanted to resist the actions of the law enforcers by climbing the walls of the International Language Institute and coming from the side of the library. But they used tear gas and sound grenades to disperse the students. The entire campus smelled of tear gas. Around 5 PM, the students came out of Hallpara (hall areas). Some journalists and a teacher were evacuating the students to safety. They were being removed from their campus against their will. Many had tears in their eyes. Anger and helplessness were all on their faces. As a student of DU, I could not contain my emotions at that moment. I cried.

Labeeb Zaman, 3rd-year student, Institute of Business Administration (IBA-DU)

I think the new quota system is a rash attempt by the government to curb the momentum of the movement. The exclusion of the female quota is appalling. Many

protestors are sceptical that this will all amount to nothing, and rightly so, given the government's previous attempts to abolish it and then reinstate it again. After protesting for so long and been beaten with sticks and even shot at, there is no way this is a valid response to our protests. This movement was also against long standing corruption and domination of political groups in public university campuses that disrupted a healthy academic environment. The high-handed tactics used by said parties to muzzle the voice of protestors are why they called for a ban on partisan politics on campus.

Yamin*, 1st-year student, BRAC University (BRACU)

All throughout the morning and afternoon of July 18, we were surrounded from both sides of the main entrance by law enforcement personnel and goons that accompanied them. They targeted the students and fired rubber bullets, sound grenades, and tear gas. Panicking, we all went back into the campus and locked the main gate. But the law enforcement personnel did not stop, they kept firing inside our campus. Many of us had to be rushed to the on-campus medical centre and soon, it became overcrowded. This went on until 12 PM, when more students from various other institutions joined in. They stood outside where the law enforcement, alongside countless other goons, attacked everyone. I got hit by two rubber bullets, and there was one student who was shot as he was

trying to enter university. Afterwards, I saw his dead body myself.

Riya*, 3rd-year student, BRACU

By the time I arrived at BRACU on July 18, there was already a human chain allowing only students to enter the university. Law enforcement personnel surrounded us, and we were peacefully protesting when a tear shell was thrown at us. A girl fell right in front of me so I had to help her up and take her to the medical centre. By the time I was there, I even heard news of a university guard being attacked and getting tear gas in his eyes. We scrambled around for toothpaste or other remedies that I brought for the people outside. This is when I saw tear shells inside the campus. We collected them to photograph for evidence and they were still hot to the touch. Afterwards, when I returned to the medical centre, I saw a student who was shot in the eye. Another had a rubber bullet lodged in his ear. We were even running out of oxygen supply to help the wounded. Many of the students had bullet wounds everywhere.

Foyzal*, 4th-year student, North South University (NSU)

On July 18, I marched from Bashundhara Gate all the way to Badda in the blazing heat surrounded by familiar faces. Some were handing out water and saline, trying to make sure we didn't have a heat stroke in the middle

of everything. By the time we arrived near Badda link road, I saw a person being carried away on a rickshaw. Students nearby said he was a student from Independent University, Bangladesh (IUB), and that he was in a critical condition. All I remember was that he had an open wound near his stomach, probably from a bullet. Afterwards, everything was a blur, the charge of the law enforcers and the helmeted attackers caused us all to scramble. Then came the tear gas, burning my eyes and throat. I lost my group by then, but there were people on both ends of the road. On one side, there were the wounded, on the other was the group directly facing the law enforcement down. From that point, even though the protestors did manage to close in on BRACU, there were far too many wounded among us.

The testimonies collected and presented represent only a fraction of the grim reality people in the country are currently facing. The big question, then, is what is to come of this. Where do we go from this wanton violence?

**Names have been changed to protect the privacy of the students.*

Reference:

The Daily Star (July 16, 2024). *Man dies at DMCH after being found in pool of blood near Dhaka College.*

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Show of support from **ACROSS THE GLOBE**

Bangladeshi students around the world express solidarity with quota reform protests

CAMPUS DESK

In a show of support for the quota reform protests that galvanised all students across the country, Bangladeshi student associations in the United States (US), China, Australia, Canada, and the United Kingdom (UK) and other parts of Europe have organised rallies and protests. Student associations in India have also released statements and organised protests in favour of the protests and as a show of support to the protestors.

Bangladeshis in Budapest, Hungary, came together on July 16 to voice their support. Students in other Hungarian cities also did the same in their respective areas. Budapest locals showed their support and concerns regarding the situation in Bangladesh.

Student associations in different Canadian universities including University of Manitoba, University of Waterloo, University of New Brunswick, University of British Columbia, and University of Saskatchewan, organised protests and rallies in and around their respective campuses and cities. In Australia, the Bangladeshi students' community in Melbourne organised a similar protest and show-of-support rally on July 17 at 11 AM in front of State Library Victoria, Melbourne.

The UK saw 200 British university academics, student groups, and workers show their solidarity with the quota reform protests in Bangladesh. In a statement published on July 25 and coordinated by the UK-Bangladeshi organisation "Nijor Manush", the 200 signatories call for academics and university workers in Bangladesh to support their students during these challenging times.

The signatories include students, academics, and workers from universities like the University of Oxford, University of Cambridge, University College London, University of London, University of Manchester, University of Glasgow, University of Nottingham, University of Essex, University of Birmingham, University of Edinburgh, King's College London, amongst others.

Bangladeshi student associations from US universities, including Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), University of North Texas, Baylor University, University of Virginia, University of Utah, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, University of Kentucky, and Pennsylvania State University, also arranged rallies around their respective campuses in the States as a show of support for the quota reform protests. They also released statements in favour of the Quota Reform Movement, condemning the attacks on protestors and urging the Bangladeshi government to protect the rights of the protestors and ensure their safety.

In India, the All India Students' Association (AISA) released a statement on their Facebook page on July 17 regarding the protests in Bangladesh saying, "We stand in absolute solidarity with the fighting students of Bangladesh!"

AISA then shared a joint statement the same day, alongside several other student associations from Nepal, Sri Lanka, Australia, and the UK, that read, "We urge the international student community to support the protesting students and youth of Bangladesh in their justified call for fair appointments based on merit and the elimination of any discriminatory practices in obtaining government jobs. We appeal to the Bangladesh Government to address the issues raised by the students and youth and to guarantee equal and dignified job opportunities for everyone."

Last week, AISA, along with three other student associations in India, organised a solidarity march towards the Bangladesh High Commission in Kolkata, showing their support for the quota movement and condemning the violence against students and protestors.

This show of solidarity by our international students, academics, and their foreign peers was first expressed through statements and rallies sometime between July 16 and 17. As the situation surrounding the protests had worsened, the international communities became more vocal. At the time of writing this article, protests and rallies are still being held across the countries mentioned above.



■ OPINION ■

The importance of **GENDER QUOTA**

In Bangladesh, where gender inequality remains a stark reality in professional sectors, gender quotas are essential for cultivating a more equitable society.



PHOTO: PALASH KHAN

AZRA HUMAYRA

Speaking with some of the students during the quota reform protestors' blockades in Shahbagh, it was observed that some factions vehemently supported the preservation of the female quota, while others argued for its dissolution. Intriguingly, a contingent of female students was actively relinquishing their quota privileges, asserting that the playing field has already been levelled, thereby rendering the quota obsolete.

But how much truth does this claim really hold?

Article 29(1) of Bangladesh's Constitution ensures "equality of opportunity for all citizens in employment or appointment to public service." However, Article 29(3) (a) empowers the state to establish "special provisions in favour of any backward section of citizens for the purpose of securing their adequate representation in the service of the Republic."

Therefore, the government's quotas for diverse communities in government jobs are consistent with this constitutional provision, on paper at least. However, reformation was still required, which led to the recent protests.

On July 21, the Supreme Court's Appellate Division overturned the High Court's decision to reinstate the quota system in government posts after deeming its abolition unlawful. The order allotted 93 percent of civil service recruitments on merit, five percent for children of freedom fighters and Biranganas, one percent for ethnic minorities, and one percent for people with disabilities and people of the third gender. This is immediately applicable to all 20 grades of government, semi-government, semi-autonomous, statutory entities, and corporations.

Until 2018, 10 percent of recruitments were reserved for women from grade 9 through 13 under the Public Service Commission (PSC). However, in the new system, there is no female quota.

In Bangladesh, where gender inequality remains a stark reality in professional sectors, gender quotas are essential for cultivating a more equitable society. Despite significant progress in education and social reforms, women still face substantial barriers to equal participation in the workforce.

Ragib Shahriar, an Economics major at Dhaka University, says, "Many people nowadays will ask, how are women still falling behind? In the HSC and SSC,

they are performing better than boys. But what about the everyday struggles women face, including using public transport, fulfilling the traditional duty of taking care of the home, or even just being subjected to social norms and conventions that are not being taken into consideration?"

From entrenched cultural norms that prioritise men's careers over women's to discriminatory practices within hiring and promotion processes that favour male candidates, there are many obstacles that women have to face.

Tahmina Alam*, a fourth-year student at Dhaka University, speaks about the bias against women, "As a woman, I have always had to work twice as hard as my male counterparts to prove that I am just as capable as them. This conscious or unconscious bias against

In a country where women encounter barriers like early marriage and domestic responsibilities and gender-diverse individuals face discrimination and stigma, gender quotas are pivotal.

women is active in the most progressive of countries, so of course Bangladesh is not free from it. Women are just as capable as men of acing the preliminary and written parts of the civil job recruitment exam, but I fear there will always be a bias against women active during the viva part. The quotas ensured there was a minimum level of female representation in the civil service, despite such bias."

Sanjida Samiha, majoring in Economics at Dhaka University, highlights the privilege that obscures the debate over eliminating gender quotas. She says, "There are a lot of women from marginalised communities and rural areas, so saying quotas for women aren't needed now just shows how ignorant we are in our privileged bubble."

Samiha adds that even with the previous quota system, which was abolished in 2018, it often failed to cater to women who actually needed it, but now its

complete removal further exacerbates gender inequality.

The debates around the quota system can be further extended by addressing its cis-normative nature, which actively disregards transgender and other gender-diverse individuals. Last year, when Dhaka University introduced a special quota for transgender students, it was met with heavy criticism from some of the students. Although including members of the third gender in the new quota system is a foot in the right direction, combining this contingent with disabled individuals makes little sense, since they are two discrete groups with unique needs.

Sarah Alam*, currently studying at a private university, observes, "I never see any conversations about the absence of gender diverse people in decision-making positions, but with their inclusion, let's see what's in store for everyone. This could be the first step towards a society where they are not so neglected, even if it's one percent."

The presence of women, transgender, and gender-diverse individuals in government roles enriches the decision-making process with a wider range of perspectives and experiences. By ensuring that women, transgender people, and gender-diverse individuals are visible in government positions, quotas help normalise their presence and capabilities in professional settings. This visibility can inspire others from these groups to pursue similar careers, creating a ripple effect of empowerment and progress. Moreover, it helps in gradually changing the cultural mindset that often restricts the roles and contributions of these groups in society.

In a country where women encounter barriers like early marriage and domestic responsibilities and gender-diverse individuals face discrimination and stigma, gender quotas are pivotal. It is commendable that the government has taken steps to include gender-diverse people, but the question for equality now remains for the women who are not in the urban bubble of gender equality, which the government failed to account for.

**Names have been changed upon request.*

Azra Humayra is majoring in Mass Communication and Journalism at Dhaka University. Find her at azrahumayra123@gmail.com

Quota protests Through the eyes of medical students



PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

“Almost all were gunshot injuries. I saw a fifteen-year-old with a bullet in his bladder. Another patient had a torn artery in his leg with blood gushing out. We packed his wound with gauze and started fluid channels in both of his hands. After his vitals were stable enough, we referred him to the National Institute of Traumatology and Orthopaedic Rehabilitation (NITOR).”

MEHRAB JAMEE

Historically, medicos have aided in almost all large-scale movements of this country. It's no surprise that they have taken part in the recent quota reform protests as well, be it on the streets or in the emergency room.

Students from different medical institutions in Dhaka and across the country have been participating in the protests from the very beginning and have expressed unity with their peers, both online and on the streets.

One such medical student, Akaash Chowdhury*, said, “It's harder for medical students to protest because we're very few in number and our academics are based on our impression to the faculty. Still, we've been speaking out. When the quota protests intensified, I went to Dhaka University (DU) to express solidarity with my friends. On July 16, almost all medical colleges protested the vicious attacks on students by goons in helmets, be it on a large or small scale. So did ours. But then all medical colleges were shut down alongside universities. So, we tried to help victims coming to our casualty department as part of our emergency response team. We didn't discriminate against anyone when it came to providing healthcare.”

Students have often faced brutal suppression and physical violence for raising their voices in favour of quota reform. Peaceful on-campus protests were met with harsh retaliation from the student wing of the ruling party.

Aditiya Roy*, a student of Sir Salimullah Medical College (SSMC) recounted how a peaceful rally at his campus was disrupted by armed thugs, where they were attacked with bricks and eventually viciously beaten with rods.

“The thugs are currently threatening to beat us again when we return to campus. They've made a hit list. How are we to

return to campus?” says Aditiya.

Even at the risk of physical harm, medical students worked alongside their teachers to provide emergency healthcare. Mokbul Ahmed*, a 5th-year student of another medical college, said, “Two of my friends and I went to college on the morning of July 19. After getting into the emergency room, we saw patients coming in with rubber bullet injuries from Jatrabari. A clash had broken out there. We stitched up an 8-year-old, who came in with a gash on his scalp from being hit by a stray brick. We have two emergency rooms with two beds each. Many of my classmates and juniors joined in to help in any way that they could. But after *Jummah*, patients started flooding in. Both emergency theatres were treating five patients each. Even so, there was a line of stretchers outside the emergency department. As med students, we're trained to deal with situations like these. But this was like being in a war zone,” adds Mokbul.

When asked what kind of patients he'd witnessed, Mokbul said, “Almost all were gunshot injuries. I saw a fifteen-year-old with a bullet in his bladder. Another patient had a torn artery in his leg with blood gushing out. We packed his wound with gauze and started fluid channels in both of his hands. After his vitals were stable enough, we referred him to the National Institute of Traumatology and Orthopaedic Rehabilitation (NITOR). If he couldn't get there fast enough, they'd have to amputate that leg. The case that stuck with me was a student named Noor. He had an entry wound just above his heart. The bullet must've missed his heart and gone through his lungs. He couldn't breathe because of the pressure from all the internal bleeding. We fixed a drain tube in his chest. Half a litre of blood poured out. All this time, Noor was saying that he couldn't breathe. When he finally could, he thanked me. And then he asked if he could join the protests again the next day. I didn't know what to say.”

Another 5th-year student, Ratul Haque*, said, “Some of us were volunteering from Thursday. After 12 PM, a rickshaw-puller came in first with blunt injuries from rubber bullets. A student from American International University - Bangladesh (AIUB) came in with a bullet injury below his left eye. Cases kept coming in till around 8 PM. Most came in with pellets or blunt injuries. On Friday after *Jummah*, casualties came pouring in. Now most of them had real bullet injuries. We provided primary treatment and referred them to specialised centres if necessary. One man came in with a bullet entry wound in his left eye and exit wound in his right one. The man was standing on a balcony. The bullet must've ricocheted. The case I can't forget is that of a 14-year-old boy. He came in with a bullet in his back. How can someone shoot a kid in the back?”

During a movement, everyone contributes in their own respective way. The recent movement saw a massively uneven distribution of power, where unarmed students were up against armed forces in full gear. In this reality, medical students have been trying their best to speak out against the atrocities being carried out. Alongside that, they've been using their skills to help save lives.

In a time of dire need, our medical students have responded with merit, with courage, and with the commitment to serve. The question remains: *Why did the need arise?*

**Names have been changed upon request*

Mehrab Jamee is a medical student.