VICTORY DAY SPECIAL 2024
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At Freedom's GATE?

ILLUSTRATION: BIPLOB CHAKROBORTY

LAMIA KARIM

Fifty-three years ago, Bangladesh won its independence after a bloody nine-month war with Pakistan. December 16, 1971, was a day of unparalleled euphoria. I still remember running through the streets with friends, waving the Bangladeshi flag. We laughed, cried, danced, and shared sweets. Strangers embraced strangers. On that day, we were all united in joy and hope. Yet it did not take long for this euphoria to be replaced by a state of economic mismanagement and rising political oppression. In the last fifteen years, that has turned into a state of terror under Sheikh Hasina's rule.

The Monsoon Uprising of August 5, 2024, has been called by many names: revolution, Bangladesh 2.0, the birth of a new republic. What began as a student-led protest against the government's decision to reserve employment opportunities for the descendants of freedom fighters—widely perceived to benefit the supporters of the ruling Awami League—quickly morphed into a nationwide movement fueled by intense anger and frustration. What is more surprising is that the question of employment for young people soon disappeared from the movement, replaced instead by demands for reforms of the constitution and state bureaucracy.

Watching these historic events on my iPad—since I don't own a television—has been nothing short of an out-of-body experience. In the later stages, the uprising became rhizomatic, drawing people from all walks of life: students, teachers, parents, artists, shopkeepers, garment workers, rickshaw pullers, and countless others joined the movement, embodying a collective desire for change. Yet, I hesitate to call this a revolution. Few anticipated the sudden fall of Sheikh Hasina's authoritarian regime, the establishment of an interim government led by Nobel Laureate Professor Yunus, or the growing momentum behind student-led demands for democracy and free speech. After 15 years of political repression, the nation witnessed a profound hunger for open dialogue and the freedom to express oneself without fear. This sudden and radical change in power came without a clear roadmap of next steps. We have heard of a Mastermind of the movement but not of a Master Plan.

However, I do not see the Uprising as a revolution. A revolution entails a systemic transformation of a nation's political and economic structures, like the Cuban Revolution, which shifted from the ideological framework of sugar plantations to communist rule. The Monsoon Uprising, by contrast, was fundamentally a revolt against political oppression: the denial of free elections, the erosion of voters' choice, and the monopolization of power by a single political party. The Uprising is fundamentally a call to replace a corrupt and repressive government with the rule of law and democratic elections, but not a systemic change in the political and economic apparatus. We remain in a neoliberal trickle-down economic structure.

Post-August 5 reflects the people's call for free and fair parliamentary elections, the elimination of government corruption, and a renewed respect for the dignity of life and free speech. These are noble and universal objectives cherished by all freedom-loving individuals. Yet, what reforms are people asking for? What kind of transformation do they envision? And what gaps, if any, remain in this demand for political change?

For Bangladesh's political transformation to succeed and establish a democratic state, the movement must genuinely represent and protect all its people.

In my opinion, the current political discourse misses several fundamental concerns that are essential for a true people's revolution. Absent are demands for equitable wealth distribution, support for trade unions, employment opportunities for our growing population of unemployed and underemployed youth, and investment to bridge the economic gap between urban and rural areas. After all, citizens of a poor country think of food and employment before constitutional reforms and free speech. Below are three critical points I wish to highlight:

Where are the Farmers?

In a country where 50-60% of the population depends on agriculture, the exclusion of farmers from this new political framework is glaring. I have not seen any serious effort to address the challenges faced by the agricultural labor force. No political representatives or leaders in this movement are advocating for the peasantry. Since the passing of Maulana Bhashani, no national figure has championed the cause of farmers in Bangladesh. Where are the promises for better credit systems, seeds, fertilizers, and fair crop prices? What about their aspirations for a Bangladesh that safeguards their rights? Why do we so easily forget those who put the rice on our table?

Where are the Mofussil Students?

What began as a student-driven initiative has failed to extend its reach to include students from provincial towns. Today, the movement is largely urban and dominated by leaders from Dhaka University. This excludes the voices of students from mofussil regions, whose needs often differ from those in the capital. Issues like inadequate facilities, lack of proper classrooms, libraries, Internet access, and underqualified teachers plague these institutions, leaving students ill-prepared for the 21st century. This perpetuates inequality in opportunities, deepening the urban-rural divide.

How Secure is the Hindu Community?

The recent arrest of Chinmoy Krishno Das and the subsequent wave of disinformation in Indian media have sparked communal tensions across our border, catching both the interim government and local media off guard. With Bangladesh no longer its vassal state, the Indian government and media are hell-bent on destabilizing the interim government. The reports of mass violence against Hindus from Indian media are exaggerated, but it cannot be denied that a climate of fear persists within the Hindu community. Yet, on TV talk shows, I hear a blanket denial of persecution. Conversations with Bangladeshi Hindu friends in the U.S. reveal heightened anxiety among their families back home. Fear—not just persecution—is equally chilling, particularly in rural areas where minority communities feel increasingly vulnerable. It behooves the Bangladeshi media to report from all parts of the country on the state of the Hindu community. Do they feel safe? Do they feel besieged? Do they think they will lose their property? These are essential questions to address through empirical evidence.

For Bangladesh's political transformation to succeed and establish a democratic state, the movement must genuinely represent and protect all its people. Without such inclusivity and action, the Monsoon Uprising risks fading into irrelevance. After all, history reminds us that monsoons are often followed by droughts.

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FROM '71 TO '24
A People United for Justice

To avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, the frustration, corruption, and lack of direction that marred the post-liberation period must not be allowed to resurface in the aftermath of the July events.

PRIYAM PAUL

This year, December 16 arrives with a distinctly different ambiance. It holds greater significance than in previous years, when the day was marked with traditional observances. The highly repressive and undemocratic Awami League government has fallen, brought down by a student-led movement that emerged through a popular uprising and at the cost of over a thousand lives and countless injuries. The war of 1971 will forever symbolize sacrifice and courage—not only against foreign invaders but also in reclaiming the rights of the people when they are gravely threatened at home. The energy and force of the 2024 uprising have once again revived the spirit of 1971, albeit in a different context, reaffirming the enduring struggle for justice and freedom.

No significant event can be directly compared to other major historical milestones, as each carries a distinct blend of similarities and unique characteristics. In the tradition of political upheavals, the great uprising of 2024 resonates with movements from 1952, 1969, 1971, and 1991. However, unlike the full-fledged war of 1971, the 2024 uprising, marked by brutal violence, underscores an urgent call for a comprehensive overhaul of political, bureaucratic, judicial, financial, and educational institutions. These institutions, riddled with corruption and driven by partisan interests over professionalism, had become increasingly dysfunctional.

PHOTO: ANWAR HOSSAIN

This iconic photograph, captured by Anwar Hossain in Dohar, Dhaka, in 1971, depicts the freedom fighters celebrating Bangladesh's independence.

PHOTO: ANISUR RAHMAN

The 2024 uprising requires more time to be thoroughly analyzed, but it raises critical questions about why such major upheavals occur so frequently in this region. While a similar uprising unfolded in Sri Lanka following the ruler's departure, the frequent uprisings in Bangladesh stand out as a pressing issue compared to other parts of the subcontinent.

time to be thoroughly analyzed, but it raises critical questions about why such major upheavals occur so frequently in this region. While a similar uprising unfolded in Sri Lanka following the ruler's departure, the frequent uprisings in Bangladesh stand out as a pressing issue compared to other parts of the subcontinent. This phenomenon may stem from Bangladesh's inherent inability to build robust democratic institutions capable of systematically addressing demands. In most cases, uprisings have occurred when political mobilization reached a critical point, often under military rule, as peaceful transitions were obstructed by the failure of an effective electoral system.

At the same time, the unique features of Bangladesh set it apart from other regions. As Badruddin Umar explained, the overwhelming homogeneity of Bangladesh, unlike the diversity of India and Pakistan with their multiple nationalities, facilitates a unified political program that supports uprisings. This shared political sentiment is a distinctive attribute of Bangladesh, enabling timely and cohesive uprisings. Umar further notes that the severity of repression in 2024 amplified the scale of the uprising. Additionally, as existing political parties failed to provide leadership, students took on primary roles in driving the movement.

The making of the Bengali nation was possible due to the victory in the 1971 War against Pakistani invaders. Youth, particularly from the peasant class, played a significant role in the resistance movement, with all sections of society participating. Before the war, the political struggle during the Pakistan period faced racial and economic exploitation in East Pakistan. The political movement was strategically framed as constitutional, anti-military, democratic, and secular in nature, while also emphasizing regional autonomy and a vision of equal justice. The nation was unified under the leadership of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib through his six-point demand in 1966, an overwhelming election victory in 1970—the first general election in Pakistan—and the non-cooperation movement in March 1971. These efforts collectively fortified the moral and mental resolve of the Bengalis to fight against Pakistan, culminating in the success of the 1971 war despite every attempt by the Pakistani junta to destroy Bengali political will through force. The 1971 war was a global event, involving not only India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh in the military struggle but also attracting the great powers of the world due to their own interests and geopolitical concerns.

Notably, the rise of Bangladesh was an immense challenge, unimaginable even to global superpowers. As Sisson and Rose articulate in their account of the Bangladesh War, it "was neither expected nor judged necessary by any of the major players before early fall of 1971." Political direction made unity possible for the cause of liberation, and after the war unleashed by the Pakistani army, an indomitable undertaking emerged to resist the occupying forces with minimal logistical support. Foreign support played a significant role, and the youth were pivotal in carrying out the war successfully.

People always join uprisings when they are subjected to overwhelming injustice by their rulers. In our country, many participants from marginalized backgrounds suffer greatly during such uprisings but frequently feel betrayed afterward. The events of 1971 and the July uprising appear similar in terms of the challenges of effective planning required to successfully lead the nation in the post-revolutionary period.

Bangladesh's government initially planned to engage youth freedom fighters during the war after the conflict. These plans aimed to channel their contributions positively toward reconstruction efforts. However, these plans were not effectively implemented after the war, leading to chaos and confusion that overshadowed hopes for positive change and resulted in disillusionment.

The uprising of 2024 risks being misdirected if not channeled properly in a systematic manner. Students at public universities have suffered significantly due to the lack of government investment in the education sector, which has resulted in poor academic facilities over the decades. Additionally, continuous harassment and persecution by members of the Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL) deterred them from organizing protests. This mirrors the activities of the NSF at Dhaka University during Ayub Khan's regime in the 1960s. However, the relentless actions of the BCL only strengthened the students' resolve. While the BCL managed to suppress the 2018 Road Safety Movement, the students in 2024 made history with the support of the masses. Private university students actively participated, and women played an instrumental role in ensuring the success of the uprising.

Even after the uprising, when the police force was nearly dysfunctional, students stepped forward to manage the traffic system, safeguard minorities from potential attacks, and actively participate in fundraising and relief efforts for flood-affected areas. However, recent developments paint a concerning picture. Young students are demanding automatic promotion without exams, pressuring teachers to resign without due process, and engaging in violent clashes with peers from other colleges.

Most concerning is the failure to provide proper medical treatment or government compensation for the injured, alongside a lack of clarity regarding support for the families of those who were martyred during the July uprising. To avoid repeating the mistakes of the past, the frustration, corruption, and lack of direction that marred the post-liberation period must not be allowed to resurface in the aftermath of the July events. Preserving national unity and pursuing genuine reform are crucial to securing a better future for the nation.

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THE SPECTER OF SILENCE

Intellectualism and the Performance of Discourse in Bangladesh

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON/THE DAILY STAR

We must resist the allure of "star intellectualism" and reclaim the legacy of the pursuit of knowledge as a means of liberation, not self-promotion. We must create spaces where diverse voices can be heard, where dissent is valued, and where the pursuit of truth is not constrained by the demands of popularity or political expediency.

NAVINE MURSHID

In the waning days of 1971, the Pakistani army and their collaborators embarked on a chilling campaign to systematically eliminate the nation's brightest minds – academics, doctors, journalists, artists – those who had dared to dream of an independent Bangladesh and articulate its promise. Their brutal killing was a calculated attempt to cripple the nascent nation, to extinguish the flame of intellectual curiosity and critical thought that fueled the liberation struggle. These were the individuals who had helped shape the idea of Bangladesh as a sovereign nation, who fought the battle of ideas in support of national self-determination. Their absence serves as a reminder of the cost of intellectual courage, casting a long shadow over the pursuit of knowledge and truth in the contemporary period. The ghosts of those silenced voices whisper a warning: intellectual freedom is a fragile thing, easily extinguished by those who fear the power of ideas. The work of freedom, then, is a site of constant struggle.

While Bangladesh boasts a vibrant intellectual scene today, it is often characterized by self-proclamation rather than rigorous scholarship. The prestige associated with the title "intellectual," hard-won through historical struggle and sacrifice, has become a currency in itself. The word carries significant prestige, gravitas, and status, along with the license to (conspiracy) theorize, proselytize, and predict events well into the future because of the historical importance of intellectual work. The manifestation of said intellectualism takes the form of constant bok-bok, in person, on stage, on talk-shows, on social media, in writing, and wherever and whenever there is any silence. The fear of being unheard, of being irrelevant, drives a relentless need to fill every space with noise, often at the expense of genuine intellectual inquiry. In other words, intellectualism has become about erasing silence. Replacing thinking with the drone of monotones has become the work of intellectual performance.

This "bok-bok" phenomenon is partly a reaction to years of suppressed speech under undemocratic rule. The long years of censorship and fear created a pent-up demand for expression, a hunger for open dialogue that is now being satiated with a sometimes-overwhelming torrent of words in the post uprising period. The newfound freedom of expression, while valuable, has created a cacophony of voices, making it difficult to discern meaningful information from the noise. The sheer volume of opinions and pronouncements can be overwhelming, leading to a sense of information overload and a devaluation of genuine expertise.

Furthermore, deeply ingrained hierarchies within intellectual spaces, based on legacy, social connections, and political affiliations, continue to filter and control public discourse. These gatekeepers, often operating within established institutions and media platforms, determine who has the right to speak and be heard, often favoring those who align with popular sentiment or offer entertaining narratives. This creates a self-perpetuating cycle, where established voices are amplified while dissenting or marginalized perspectives struggle to gain traction. This theater is vibrant with excellent performances of allyship, class solidarity, and inclusion; there are multiple such theaters competing for political/social space. Each is exclusionary, however, although together they might produce the veneer of democracy and plurality.

In this environment, intellectual authority is no longer derived solely from rigor or analysis but from a complex interplay of factors, including title, seniority, institutional affiliation, and the ability to generate buzz. Designated speakers dominate intellectual events, while others perform the role of praise singers, creating an illusion of dialogue that masks a one-way flow of information. The pursuit of stardom within academia further exacerbates this trend, fostering conformity and stifling dissent.

This raises critical questions about the definition of an intellectual itself in contemporary Bangladesh. Is it determined by academic credentials, social media following, political influence, or some combination of these factors? The past glory of university professors who embodied a centralized form of intellectualism rooted in deep scholarship and social commitment, stands in stark contrast to the fragmented and often partisan landscape of today. Their legacy serves as a reminder that true intellectualism requires both intellectual prowess and a commitment to truth, justice, and the betterment of society.

This is not to deny the presence of committed academics and intellectuals who actively challenge injustice. During the July uprising and other political movements, many university professors took to the streets, transcending party affiliations and ideological biases to oppose oppression and state repression. However, intellectualism encompasses more than public demonstrations of solidarity. It demands rigorous research, critical thinking, and a commitment to fostering these qualities in students. As educators, we have a responsibility to insist that critical thinking and engagement be central to intellectual discourse, that the battle of ideas rely on rigor and logic, not just star power and viral fame.

During the July Uprising, a speech I gave at a University Teachers Network event went viral. While I appreciate the attention it garnered, I believe my academic work, my recent book on Bengali Muslims in particular, offers a more substantial contribution to the intellectual landscape in South Asia. Standing up for our students and opposing their unjust killing should be a normal, commonsensical act, not a marker of exceptional intellectualism. The tendency to equate viral moments of public dissent with intellectual authority is problematic. True intellectual engagement requires deeper analysis and a willingness to grapple with complex ideas, not just catchy slogans or emotional appeals. The pursuit of knowledge should be driven by a genuine desire for understanding, not the pursuit of fleeting fame. The "thinning" of the word "intellectual" risks diluting the value of critical thinking and expertise, reducing intellectualism to a mere performance rather than a genuine pursuit of understanding.

Moving forward, Bangladesh must foster an intellectual climate that values genuine dialogue, critical engagement, and diversity of thought. We must resist the allure of "star intellectualism" and reclaim the legacy of the pursuit of knowledge as a means of liberation, not self-promotion. We must create spaces where diverse voices can be heard, where dissent is valued, and where the pursuit of truth is not constrained by the demands of popularity or political expediency. Only then can Bangladesh truly honor the sacrifice of its martyrs and fulfill its potential as a nation where knowledge empowers and liberates people.

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PHOTO: PRABIR DAS/THE DAILY STAR

game is iterative, updated each time with more conspiracy theories. The winners are those who can proclaim, "I said it first in the year [insert year]," first. The goal is to claim superior knowledge and intellectual prowess based not on analysis but prediction, which gives them legitimacy to "educate" people and shape society, primarily through social media.

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Role of Intellectuals in Bangladesh Society, 1947-2024

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON/THE DAILY STAR

There was no movement against the recolonization of Bangladesh and no movement for the restoration of democracy in the People's Republic. Bengali intellectuals became thoroughly politicized and transformed into the ideological apparatus of the fascist state, which lasted from 1972 to 2024 under various guises.

A.I. MAHBUB UDDIN AHMED

Two significant political events occurred in Bangladesh society between 1947 and 2024: the Bangladesh Liberation Movement of 1971 and the Anti-discrimination Students Movement of 2024. Both movements centered around the University of Dhaka. As a student of that institution from 1966 and a teacher up until now, my life—particularly my academic life—has been intertwined with the pulse of the university and these movements. I witnessed both movements as though I were a part of them.

The most striking feature of these movements was the differing role of intellectuals. During the Bangladesh Liberation Movement in 1971, most intellectuals were the driving force of the movement and, as such, became victims of oppression. On the night of 25 March 1971, the Pakistani forces planned to eliminate intellectuals, and on the night of 14 December 1971, over 200 intellectuals were rounded up in Dhaka and executed en masse. Thus, the Liberation War began

PHOTO: ZIAUDDIN SHIPLU/THE DAILY STAR

We can observe many symptoms of intellectual barbarism and dying intellectualism since August. A country administered without ideas, and without the dealers of ideas (intellectuals), will become a stagnant state.

and ended with the martyrdom of intellectuals. In contrast, during the Anti-discrimination Students Movement (also known as the anti-Fascist Movement) in 2024, most intellectuals were silent witnesses to oppression, supporters of fascist rulers, and willing oppressors of the students who led the movement. The intellectuals of Bangladesh thus became the beneficiaries of fascism. Consequently, the Anti-discrimination Students Movement began and ended with the martyrdom of students and the general public. This realization gave me an unsettling feeling about the mainstream intellectuals and instantly reminded me of Marx's reflections on the coup d'état of December 2, 1851 by Louis-Napoléon Bonaparte: "Hegel remarks somewhere that all great world-historic facts and personages appear, so to speak, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce" (Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, 1852).

At the outset, it is important to clarify the meaning of intellectuals as distinguished from public intellectuals and the intelligentsia. Moreover, it is also essential to outline the role of intellectuals in other societies.

According to Raymond Williams in his *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1983), the intelligentsia is a status class composed of scholars, academics, teachers, journalists, and literary writers. The term was first used by Karol Libelt in 1844 and later by Bronisław Trentowski to describe Polish "inteligencja" (intellectuals), a professionally active social echelon of the national bourgeoisie with moral and political leadership in opposing the cultural hegemony of the Russian Empire in Poland. In pre-revolution Russia, the term "intelligentsiya" referred to a relatively autonomous group, united by common values and a sense of mission. Thus, ethical commitment to the liberation of the people from political and economic oppression was a necessary condition of membership in the intelligentsia. A half-learned student or a semi-literate peasant could become a member of the intelligentsia through participation in its liberating mission, whereas a conservative professor would be excluded as a supporter of reactionary forces.

Jeremy Jennings and Tony Kemp-Welch, in *Intellectuals in Politics: From the Dreyfus Affair to Salman Rushdie* (1997), define an intellectual as a person who engages in critical thinking, research, and reflection about the reality of society, and who proposes solutions to its normative problems. However, Thomas Sowell in *Intellectuals and Society* (2009) locates "intellectuals" as an occupational category, referring to people whose occupations primarily deal with ideas—writers, academics, and the like.

Sowell distinguishes between intellectuals and public intellectuals. Public intellectuals directly address the population at large, whereas intellectuals are largely confined to their respective specialties. At the core of the notion of an intellectual is the dealer in ideas: an intellectual's work begins and ends with ideas. For example, some of the most impactful books in contemporary societies were written by Karl Marx and Sigmund Freud in the nineteenth century. However, these books were seldom read, and even less understood, by the general public. Yet, the ideas of Marx and Freud inspired vast numbers of public intellectuals worldwide, who in turn influenced the general public. Edward Said, in *Representations of the Intellectual* (1993), identified an intellectual's mission as the advancement of human freedom and knowledge. Thus, the essence of public intellectuals is to engage with public issues, influencing public minds through criticism, popular writings, political commentaries, and prophecy.

In post-1940 American society, as identified by Russell Jacoby in *The Last Intellectuals: American Culture in the Age of the Academy* (1987), the role of public intellectuals has been in decline. This trend is also observed by Michael Ignatieff in *The Decline and Fall of Public Intellectuals* (1997) for British society. However, with the advancement of digital technology in the West, public intellectuals have emerged in cyberspace, communicating with the public via the Internet, as Paul Ashdown discusses in *From Public Intellectuals to Techno-Intellectuals: Gunslingers on the Cyberspace Frontier* (1998). Another factor in the decline of public intellectuals in the West is the "bureaucratization of knowledge" in universities. James Smyth and Robert Hattam, in *Intellectual as Hustler: Researching Against the Grain of the Market* (2000), also point to the commercialization of academic work and market-driven consultancy and research as contributing factors. This situation is also seen among Bangladeshi academics. Recent changes in the curriculum and syllabi clearly show they are: (a) politically correct, (b) market-driven, and (c) NGOized. Consequently, post-1970 Bangladeshi intellectuals lost their emancipatory character and failed to play a significant role in the July-August 2024 Movement. They did not produce ideas like Marx, Gramsci, Stuart Mill, or Rousseau. In some cases, they became complicit in fascist political agendas, supporting police violence against unarmed student protesters.

Born during the Bengal Renaissance after the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 and the English Education Act of 1835, Bengali intellectuals remained predominantly middle-class bhadrolok and communal. Their Indian nationalism crystallized into colonial forms: Hindu and Muslim nationalism. However, centered around the issue of cultural autonomy for Bengalis under Pakistan, a rudimentary form of Polish-Russian-type intelligentsia began to emerge. They opposed the cultural hegemony of Urdu in Pakistan. Thus, the Bengali intellectuals in East Pakistan were largely divided into two groups: hegemonic Urdu and counter-hegemonic Bangla. The quest for political autonomy originated in the cultural autonomy of the Bengalis. The apparent success of the Bengali intellectuals in organizing the Bangladesh Liberation Movement and forming the People's Republic of Bangladesh led to their brutal killings by the Pakistani Army and their collaborators.

The massacre of the Bengali intellectuals led to a crisis among them soon after independence. Politicized intellectuals abandoned their oppositional role. Bengali fascism emerged under one-party rule (BAKSAL), and political killings of opposition forces began. The democratic state structure collapsed. Due to intellectual bankruptcy, there was no meaningful protest against it. There was no movement against the recolonization of Bangladesh and no movement for the restoration of democracy in the People's Republic. Bengali intellectuals became thoroughly politicized and transformed into the ideological apparatus of the fascist state, which lasted from 1972 to 2024 under various guises.

In Western countries, public intellectuals mostly perform professional roles in society, while in developing countries, the limited opportunities for professional development encourage intellectuals to engage directly or indirectly in politics. To become beneficiaries, all administrations of public universities and University Teacher Associations during the BNP and AL regimes willingly embraced Friedrich Hayek's *The Road to Serfdom* (1944). This led to the paralysis of criticism (Herbert Marcuse) in the nation and on campuses. Bangladesh became a one-dimensional, monolithic polity. The emancipatory intellectuals of the pre-independence era were metamorphosed into enslaved intellectuals in the post-independence era. Most of them joined fascism, as Erich Fromm described in *Escape from Freedom* (1941), betraying the promises of the Enlightenment.

In 1971, the intellectualization of Bangladesh suffered irreplaceable losses due to the Pakistan Army's genocide. Between 1972 and 2024, the intellectualization of Bangladesh was ruthlessly suppressed by its own government. This is perhaps both a tragedy and a farce. It underscores the significant differences in the role of Bangladeshi intellectuals in two opposing movements with far-reaching consequences for the future.

The dethronement of the ignominious Bangladeshi intellectuals during the Anti-Fascist Movement of 2024 clearly exposes their shameful role. When the protests were unfolding, fascist intellectual acolytes were maligning the students and spreading disinformation. In many universities, VCs and Proctors, in collusion with pro-government teachers, members of the Chhatra League, and the police, made students victims of brutal torture. Perhaps unwittingly, all our educational institutions, along with our non-emancipatory intellectuals, have embraced the "kiss of death." We can observe many symptoms of intellectual barbarism and dying intellectualism since August. A country administered without ideas, and without the dealers of ideas (intellectuals), will become a stagnant state. If the future intellectuals of Bangladesh cannot restore their emancipatory role and only join the rat race for accumulating wealth, as before, they will push the country into a Hobbesian Leviathan.

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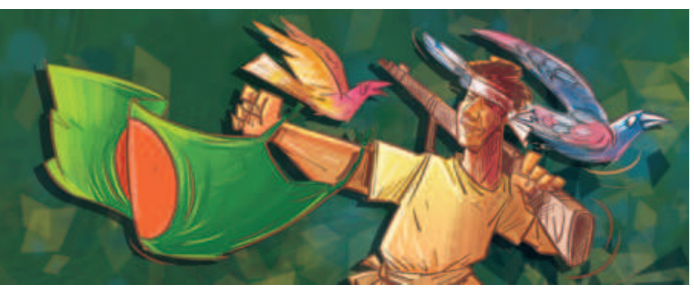

Gender, Politics, and the Call for Change

Panelists discuss the significance of activism in various campaigns to spotlight women's contributions during the "Woman, Life, Freedom" session, held on December 3 as part of the "36 Days of July: Saluting the Bravehearts" exhibition, organised by The Daily Star.

PHOTO: AMRAN HOSSAIN

Women's growing anger could serve as a catalyst for change. "Don't let this anger fade. We hope to bring about change during this interim government that will help women progress and gain more visibility.

SAUDIA AFRIN

In July, the antidiscrimination movement gained renewed momentum as courageous female students, standing side by side with their male peers, took to the streets in protest, enduring violent attacks while demanding their rights. Women in this region have long demonstrated extraordinary strength and resilience in the political arena, from Bangladesh's struggle for independence to the 2024 mass uprising.

Yet, over time, their voices have been muffled, marked by a decline in leadership representation and a disturbing rise in gender-based violence. Instead of being celebrated for their contributions, many women now find themselves disheartened and fearful, uncertain of what lies ahead.

A group of women united at The Daily Star Centre on the fourth day (December 3, 2024) of the weeklong program, "36 Days of July: Saluting the Bravehearts," to share their stories and perspectives.

The dialogue, titled "Women, Life, and Freedom," began with topics on political representation and branched out to other interconnected issues, including women's rights, gender discrimination, and sexual harassment.

Following the collapse of the previous government, there was a heightened anticipation among citizens for the establishment of a new interim administration. However, the minimal representation of women in the new government raised numerous questions and concerns.

"It was disturbing for all of us. When there was women's representation, it should not have been tokenistic. The worst part is that when we started discussing this and posting on social media, another woman was added to the list, but even that decision was made by them," said one of the speakers.

Adding to this point, Wasima Farzana, an aspiring anthropologist, said that women in politics may find themselves in a marginalized position due to their lack of experience. "The way women are functioning can be described as embodying masculinity. Their habit of being present in public and political spaces is low. We must nurture the habit of occupying these spaces," she emphasized.

Habiba Nowrose, an academician and photographer, aptly said, "Questions are being raised about why women's visibility in political representation remains low. I believe a constructive structural discussion is missing from dialogues, even in seminars and meetings initiated by women-centric organizations. This lack of structural dialogue hinders the process of achieving meaningful reforms to increase women's participation in politics."

The nature of leadership has always differed between men and women. "In our political sphere, the approach to political participation is extremely masculine in a toxic way. It requires arrogance and an aggressive demeanor. Women do not naturally function that way. We must emphasize creating leadership spaces that are women-friendly," said Trishia Nashtaran, a female activist and founder of Meye Network.

An uprising does not signify that all daily life problems have vanished; they are still deeply embedded in the system. Issues such as security for women in public spaces, the availability of daycare facilities, and transport services often go unaddressed. Should we prioritize these concerns now, or leave them for later? Who will strongly advocate for them? These aspects require serious consideration. They said such a platform could help formulate action plans and influence policymaking to increase women's visibility and representation in politics.

The speakers further emphasized the importance of activism through different campaigns to highlight women's contributions and called for engaging the media as allies to reshape societal perspectives. Women also need to increase their political awareness and understand gender politics, they noted.

Dr. Sakia Haque, president of Travelettes of Bangladesh, advocated for increased visibility of women's work, stressing that the media should highlight their efforts to prevent them from being overlooked.

Rabeya Jhumur, a journalism student, called for amplifying the voices of marginalized groups, such as homemakers and women from rural areas. "When their rights are violated, no one advocates for them."

One speaker proposed creating a platform that brings together all women's organizations, aiming to formalize an action plan that includes policy-making and emphasizes activism.

Shehreen Ataur Khan, assistant professor at Jagannath University, emphasized the importance of quotas to address systemic inequalities. "Equality and equity are distinct concepts that must be understood from the family to the workplace and society as a whole. Quotas are vital for ensuring women have access to spaces from which they've been excluded."

Another speaker pointed out that schools should work alongside families to teach equitable roles for men and women, stressing that such foundational education is essential for transforming societal norms.

Naziba Basher, senior sub-editor at The Daily Star, highlighted the media's influential role in shaping public narratives. She criticized the media for sidelining women during movements, recalling how several media outlets deliberately excluded student protest organizer Nusrat Tabassum from a photo of protest leaders at the DB office. "Media professionals in positions of power must champion the inclusion of marginalized groups, including indigenous women, gender-diverse individuals, and women from low-income backgrounds," she urged.

After August 5, numerous incidents of sexual violence against women were reported. An indigenous woman was allegedly raped by two men in Ramgarh upazila of Khagrachari on August 22. The following month, a significant part of the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT) witnessed unrest, with houses and business establishments burned, leaving scores injured and resulting in deaths during sectarian violence.

"When things seemed to be settling down, the brutal incident occurred, clearly indicating a rise in violence that is often ignored by society. If this is what we call freedom, I question what kind of freedom it truly is," said indigenous activist Shuchi Marma. She highlighted the systemic oppression faced by indigenous communities and raised critical questions about whether they are being left behind, or if there is a deliberate effort to keep them marginalized.

Another individual from the hills echoed this sentiment, saying, "Even during the victory parade, I was called 'Chakma' by many. It stirs a mix of indifference and deep pain within me. I fear for my son, who faces stereotypical remarks in school"

Shireen Huq, the founding member of Naripokkho and chairperson of the newly established Women's Rights Commission, emphasized that women's growing anger could serve as a catalyst for change. "Don't let this anger fade. We hope to bring about change during this interim government that will help women progress and gain more visibility. This anger is the first step toward reform. Women must take ownership of public spaces to ensure their presence is felt," she said.

She also mentioned that there are 90 days ahead, during which they seek input from various sectors and generations.

Speakers further highlighted the need to involve men in telling women's stories to help reshape societal norms. They also called for social media movements to promote accurate and positive representations of women's contributions.

Shaveena Anam, facilitator of the discussion and Manager of New Content and Audience Research at The Daily Star, commented, "I've frequently heard people say, when discussing the limited representation of women, 'Now is not the right time for this conversation. Focus on reform first. Women, wait for your turn.' What we need is a neutral platform for women, one that can bring together advocates for rights and amplify the voices of those at the grassroots level."

Recommendations:

1. Structural dialogues are crucial for achieving meaningful reforms to increase women's participation in politics.
2. Long-term planning, including dialogues, action plans, and public involvement, is essential to help women understand their power and move forward with an affirmative attitude.
3. Equality and equity, as crucial elements, must be widely discussed, especially within families. Involving men in women's stories can be instrumental in reshaping societal norms.
4. It is vital to strengthen alliances among women, with the media serving as an influential component of society.
5. Women must claim public spaces to ensure their visibility.

Saudia Afrin *is a journalist at the daily star*

ECLIPSING REPRESSION

The Herculean Feat of Bangladeshi Journalism in July '24

SIFAT AFRIN SHAMS

Amid unprecedented levels of suppression, legal hurdles, and personal risks, journalists in Bangladesh stood firm against the fascist government of Sheikh Hasina during the July uprising.

The stories of the challenges they faced, and the courage with which they overcame them, serve as testaments to the hope we still cling to — the hope that Bangladesh can have a better, brighter future as a true democracy.

The tools of suppression and oppression used by the previous government to silence independent media were intensified during the mass movement. Feeling threatened by the critical stance of a large portion of journalists, the government, like any fascist regime, tried to dictate what the media could publish, even threatening to halt broadcasts.

At around 8:30 p.m. on July 18, the nation experienced a total internet blackout, with mobile data and broadband services becoming unavailable. During this period, journalists worked tirelessly to collect news and share information, as recounted during a discussion titled "Blackout Chronicles: How Journalists and Activists Navigated the Blackout," organised by The Daily Star on December 4, 2024.

Shamima Sultana, senior reporter at Channel 24, mentioned how they were forced to revert to analog journalism methods. They gathered information from students and protesters via texts and calls, despite frequent disruptions. Alternative, expensive, and rare communication methods, such as cable connections, were used to collect material from outside Dhaka.

"The government was never fully successful in suppressing us because we resorted to all kinds of alternatives," she said.

The journalist, still traumatised from being brutally beaten by a mob on August 4 at Shahbagh, shared:

"Our channel never fully compromised. There was pressure on us, but we always tried to sneak in the real news during bulletins and other times."

Panelists discuss the challenges journalists faced while performing their duties during the July uprising at The Blackout Chronicles session, held on December 4 as part of the 36 Days of July: Saluting the Bravehearts exhibition, organised by The Daily Star.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS

She and her colleagues also sent information and footage of atrocities to international media outlets like the BBC, which faced less direct pressure.

"We did that because our house was at risk of being shut down if we ran such stories, but the news still had to be out there," she added.

Tanvir Chowdhury, a broadcast journalist at Al Jazeera, explained how local media provided tips and information that international outlets relied upon. While international media adopted certain safety measures, local journalists bore severe risks.

"Due to our media brand, we knew the police or other forces would not harm us, but groups like the BCL could, and they would blame the students," he said.

As a video journalist, sending footage was a top priority for him, but the government severely hindered this by cutting off internet access. Apart from using Al Jazeera's satellite system — which was occasionally jammed by security forces — he relied on the local AFP office for help. Shafiqul Alam, the AFP bureau chief at the time (and now press secretary to the Chief Advisor), along with his team, provided alternate internet access and opened their office to accommodate both international and local journalists.

"It was a top-secret operation back then. If it had been discovered, the office would have faced a severe crackdown," he said with a smile, adding that it can now be shared openly.

Another major challenge journalists faced during the movement was the spread of misinformation and disinformation that followed the restoration of internet access. The government actively downplayed the real numbers of protesters and casualties. Hospitals were instructed not to disclose information about injured individuals or bodies brought in.

"We were not getting any info from the government, so we had to call individual hospitals, which was time-consuming. But after July 18, even hospital directors stopped disclosing details," said Qadaruddin Shishir, Fact Check Editor at AFP.

Following the internet blackout, social media saw a flood of disinformation campaigns led by pro-government forces. This significantly increased the workload of the AFP Fact Check department.

The AFP office in Dhaka became known as "Shadhin Bangla Betar Kendra 2" among journalists, as it was the only place with internet access during the five-day blackout. The office was opened to both local and international journalists with permission from AFP headquarters, Shishir noted.

For many young journalists, the scale of confrontation with authorities was a novel experience.

"We were on the field and had to decide our course of action instantly, depending on how the situation escalated," said Saim Bin Mujib, multimedia journalist at The Daily Star, about covering news in such volatile conditions.

On July 16, when clashes in Dhaka between protesters, police, and government supporters continued for hours, journalists found themselves mediating.

"We positioned ourselves between the opposing sides and told the pro-government forces, 'The students want to retreat now. Please do not attack,'" Saim recounted, describing an experience unlike any other in his career.

The unprecedented internet blackout posed significant challenges for new media journalists.

"We were left with no means to reach the people — it felt like an existential crisis," said Saim, adding that his team prepared footage and reports in advance to release the truth as soon as internet access was restored.

Journalists are assets to society when they remain unbiased. While some media outlets misused their platforms to propagate the fascist agenda of the Hasina government, many journalists upheld the principles of journalism, risking their jobs, health, and lives during one of the nation's most critical moments.

We mourn the loss of journalists Hasan Mehedi, Shakil Hossain, Abu Taher Md Turab, Tahir Jaman Priyo, and Pradip Kumar Bhowmik, who sacrificed their lives to reveal the atrocities committed by the Hasina regime.

It is now imperative for the government and political parties to uphold the fourth pillar of democracy by protecting media houses and journalists from partisan pressures.

Recommendations

1. Introduce a comprehensive security protocol based on international standards to prevent attacks on journalists in the line of duty.
2. Strengthen legal protections to safeguard press freedom and freedom of expression.
3. Ensure a safe working environment for journalists, free from political or partisan interference.
4. Provide specialised training to help journalists combat misinformation and disinformation campaigns effectively.
5. Implement measures to support journalists affected by PTSD and psychological distress.

Sifat Afrin Shams *is a journalist and former sub-editor at The Daily Star.*

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Panelists discuss ways to transform universities into true spaces for freedom of thought and learning during the Pedagogy of Protest session, held on December 2 as part of 36 Days of July: Saluting the Bravehearts, an exhibition organised by The Daily Star.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON/THE DAILY STAR

LESSONS IN LIBERATION

Universities and the Fight for Justice

The historic uprising in July represented the voice of youth rising against various forms of hegemony. It underscored the potential of politically aware students and the need for supportive educators to cultivate spaces for critical thought.

MIFTAHUL JANNAT

The July Uprising has put forth an interesting revelation: the role of students, backed by teachers, and educational institutions as a whole, in shaping a country's political future. When Nietzsche highlighted the three objectives of educators in a society, stating, *'people must learn to see; they must learn to think, and they must learn to speak and to write'*, he essentially defined the role of teachers in enabling individuals to shape a society driven by nobility, virtue, moral and intellectual excellence. This essence was captured in an engaging session titled *'Pedagogy of Protest: A Discussion with University Teachers on the Frontlines,'* organised by *The Daily Star* as part of the weeklong programme *'36 Days of July: Saluting the Bravehearts.'* The open discussion was held between students and teachers who played an active role during the July movement.

The historic uprising in July represented the voice of youth rising against various forms of hegemony. It underscored the potential of politically aware students and the need for supportive educators to cultivate spaces for critical thought and discourse. The discussion explored critical questions: How can teachers engage politically aware students in classrooms? How courageous are educators in fostering the political awareness expected of young individuals?

Bridging Gaps in Classroom Discourse

Prof. Mirza Taslima Sultana of Jahangirnagar University highlighted the structural and systemic barriers that hinder open discussions in classrooms. 'Students and teachers face challenges due to systemic gaps and political influences,' she noted. These issues hamper the creation of an environment conducive to intellectual debate and political awareness. In private universities, the restrictions are even more pronounced. Musharrat Sharmee Hossain, a faculty member at North South University, observed that department-wise limitations and a curriculum designed to serve a capitalist, politically neutral model often restrict meaningful political discourse.

'Are we attempting to depoliticise private university students?' Musharrat questioned, reflecting on the heightened academic pressure since the movement ended. While private universities pride themselves on being politically neutral, they inadvertently stifle political awareness. However, she also highlighted the scope for introducing more diversified general education courses, including those focused on linguistics and politics, to foster critical discussions. 'There is a lot of potential to create spaces where politics can be discussed constructively,' she added.

Encouraging Multiplicity of Voices

The discussion frequently returned to the need for plurality and openness in classrooms. Shahnawaz Khan Chandan, a faculty member at Jagannath University, stressed the importance of presenting multiple interpretations of theories to students and allowing them to decide which resonates most with them. He warned against imposing singular perspectives, noting that previous governments' attempts to propagate specific versions of history were met with student resistance.

'As educators, we must not promote or propagate one-sided narratives. Instead, we should create spaces where all voices can be heard,' Shahnawaz emphasized. This plurality, he argued, not only fosters critical thinking but also prevents the alienation of students from different socio-economic or ideological backgrounds.

Political Clubs as Platforms for Dialogue

The need for alternative platforms to engage students politically without direct involvement in active politics was another key takeaway. One participant suggested forming political science clubs where students can discuss and debate political ideas in a constructive environment. 'Student politics does not have to mean street protests. There are other ways to engage politically, such as organised discussions and forums,' they remarked. Such platforms can instil a sense of participation in politics while fostering mutual respect and tolerance for diverse opinions.

Making Universities Where Free Thoughts Thrive

The intersection of education and state politics was a recurring theme. Dhaka University Prof. Tanzimuddin Khan, a member of the University Grants Commission (UGC), argued that the education system is deeply intertwined with the state system. 'If we don't change the state system, there is no hope for the education system,' he said, highlighting issues of structural discrimination along lines of gender, religion, and medium of instruction.

Prof. Kamrul Hassan of Dhaka University echoed these concerns, comparing teachers and journalists to the 'white blood cells' of society. 'We've failed to build universities as true institutions of higher learning. Students are still afraid to ask questions, keeping universities at a school-like level,' he remarked. He called for open discussions on research, science, and politics, noting that such exchanges between students and teachers in foreign universities foster connections that are currently missing in Bangladesh.

Cultivating Political Awareness from a Young Age

Several speakers emphasized the need to introduce political education at the primary and secondary levels. 'Politics is embedded in society, and society is embedded in politics,' Prof. Tamziuddin Khan observed. Teaching students that politics is more than street protests—that it is about constructive discussion and critical engagement—is crucial. Family guidance also plays a significant role in fostering political awareness, encouraging young people to think beyond their immediate socio-economic bubbles.

Autonomy and Structural Reforms

Autonomy for universities emerged as a critical point. Prof. Mirza Taslima Sultana and Musharrat Sharmee Hossain both called for universities to have the freedom to set their academic and administrative priorities. 'Without autonomy, the UGC's excessive control over everything, from class schedules to teaching methods, hampers the growth of institutions,' Musharrat noted.

However, autonomy alone is not enough. Prof. Kamrul Hassan pointed out that discrimination among students and teachers persists, undermining the potential for universities to act as transformative spaces. 'We must build institutions that empower students to become free thinkers, not ones that impose restrictions on their voices,' he said.

Sustaining Political Discourse

One of the most significant challenges discussed was maintaining the political awakening among private university students sparked by the July Uprising. Participants noted that after the movement, academic pressures, particularly in private universities, have dulled the momentum. The question remains: How can we sustain this discourse across all educational institutions, public and private?

Prof. Kamrul Hassan suggested introducing student unions at all levels, including schools and colleges, to give students a platform to voice their demands and engage in constructive dialogue. 'This practice must start early and be sustained throughout their academic journey,' he argued.

A Vision for the Future

Concluding the session, Nazia Manzoor, editor of *Daily Star Books and Literature*, emphasized the importance of questioning structural flaws in society from the root level. *'If we can't raise questions now, the future of this country will be bleak,'* she warned. Participants agreed that promoting mutual understanding and respect through family guidance and education, beginning at the primary level, is essential for nurturing a politically aware and tolerant generation.

The July Uprising has shown the importance of politically aware youths, who can challenge hegemony and advocate for justice. The discussion emphasizes the urgent need for structural reforms, constructive classroom discourse, and sustained platforms for dialogue to nurture such a generation. Only by addressing these issues can we hope to forge an education system and political culture where we will be able to ask and receive questions fearlessly, express what we think and not lose composure when others say what they think, and cherish the pursuit of truth, while remaining humble about whether we know it.

Recommendations

1. Political education must begin at the primary level to help youth engage constructively with societal issues.
2. Structural reforms are needed to make universities inclusive spaces for free thought and open dialogue between teachers and students.
3. Educational curricula should include diversified general education courses to foster critical thinking and sustained political discourse.
4. Universities require autonomy from excessive state control to prioritise academic and administrative growth.
5. Alternative platforms, such as political science clubs and student unions, are essential for sustaining political discourse in academic institutions.

Miftahul Jannat *is a journalist at The Daily Star*

Teachers of Jahangirnagar University staged a silent procession on July 30, 2024, with red cloth covering their mouths, protesting the killing of students during the quota reform movement.

PHOTO: COLLECTED

VICTORY DAY SPECIAL 2024
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Recognising the marginalised HEROES OF THE JULY UPRISING

Discussants highlight the sacrifices of the working class during the July Uprising and the silencing of their voices at the Marginalised Voices of the July Revolution session, held on December 5, 2024 as part of 36 Days of July: Saluting the Bravehearts, an exhibition by The Daily Star.

PHOTO: PRABIR DAS/THE DAILY STAR

The uprising wasn't only about students. The marginalised -- the rickshaw pullers, the garment workers, the homeless, and the Hijra community -- also bore the brunt of this movement. They bled, suffered and died.

AYMAN ANIKA

The July uprising in Bangladesh was a pivotal moment of bravery, sacrifice, and collective rage. The streets boiled with defiance as people, desperate for change, faced bullets and batons. While the students who led the charge are applauded and remembered, a quieter, more painful story lives in the shadows -- the story of the marginalised. These voices deserve recognition. They are the foundation of the July uprising -- fighting for a fairer Bangladesh where everyone can thrive, regardless of their background.

On a poignant day of remembrance at The Daily Star's event, "Marginalised Voices of the July Revolution," these invisible heroes shared their stories, revealing the raw wounds they still carry.

The pain of erasure

The uprising wasn't only about students. The marginalised -- the rickshaw pullers, the garment workers, the homeless, and the Hijra community -- also bore the brunt of this movement. They bled, suffered and died.

Rickshaw puller Noor Muhammad's eyes welled up as he recalled a heartbreaking task. On August 4, the police took Noor by his hand and forced him to transport the injured body of Golam Nafiz on his rickshaw.

Noor recounted, "I was carrying a passenger and suddenly the police stopped me. Amidst the chaos, the police instructed me to carry a young boy's injured body. There was no one to assist me."

"No mother should lose her child this way," Noor cried, his voice breaking under the weight of his memories. Rejected by hospitals, he eventually arranged for an autorickshaw to take Nafiz to Shaheed Suhrawardy Medical College and Hospital. But hope was a cruel illusion.

Similarly, Md Jobaer Hasan's eyes were hollow when he recounted what happened to his younger brother, 15-year-old Julfiqar.

The boy went missing during the chaos of the uprising, and for six days, the family swung between hope and despair. When they found him at the Dhaka Medical College Hospital (DMCH) Burn Unit, the reality was a nightmare.

"His eye was completely damaged, and over 100 shotgun pellets were lodged in his body," Jobaer whispered. His voice trembled under the weight of helplessness.

Why is it that when marginalised families like Jobaer's seek justice, they encounter indifference? Why does the state's compassion seem to dry up when the victims are poor, nameless, or faceless in the eyes of the elite?

If Julfiqar had been the son of a politician or an industrialist, his story would have dominated the headlines. But because he was just a boy from a struggling family, his pain became a whisper in the wind.

We need to stop treating justice as a privilege for the few. The government must provide comprehensive medical and psychological support to victims like Julfiqar and their families.

The dream deferred

Shariful Islam, a private service holder, highlights another harsh reality of the marginalised: the humiliation of asking for help.

Shot on August 5, Shariful bore his wounds with dignity, only to be met with apathy at the hospitals. The financial aid he eventually received from the July Smriti Foundation felt like a slap in the face.

"I had to go to the July Smriti Foundation for assistance," he said, frustration colouring his words. In a just society, a man who risked his life for change shouldn't have to beg for dignity afterwards.

The narrative we often hear celebrates the student leaders who stood at the forefront of this revolution. Their courage is undeniable and deserves every bit of recognition. But the glaring truth remains: the marginalised likewise bore the brunt of this movement.

Mahfuzur Rahman Shamim, convener of Bangladesh Janatar Sangsad, captured this hypocrisy perfectly: "If we fail to include them as stakeholders in building a new Bangladesh, we are not heading towards true democracy."

Pria Khan, a member of the Hijra community, recalled, "We served at DMCH from July 17, witnessing a relentless wave of dead bodies." On July 19 alone, the death toll overwhelmed the morgues. "Bodies were arriving on stretchers, in ambulances, and even on rickshaws," she remembered.

Her community collected 730 bags of blood and raised Tk 3 lakh for the injured. But their efforts were met with hostility. "My phone was snatched, videos deleted, and I was threatened for documenting the atrocities," Pria revealed. Yet their service, like their pain, remains invisible to many.

The statistics are damning. 80 per cent of those killed during the July uprising were not students, but workers -- rickshaw pullers, garment workers, and the homeless. These are the people who keep Bangladesh's economy running, who build the infrastructure, who sew the garments that fuel our GDP. And yet, when it comes to recognition, they are invisible.

Asadul Islam, central office secretary of Bangladesh Garment Sramik Samhati, spoke passionately about the garment workers who bore the brunt of the violence. "Their sacrifices remain unacknowledged, except for a few cases highlighted in the media," he said. The Tk 1 lakh compensation for injured families was dismissed as "alms, not compensation."

Prabir Saha of the same platform stressed the need to honour these workers. "We must implement the 18-point demands, including attendance bonuses, minimum wage reform, and an eight-hour workday," he insisted. Their fight, he argued, was not just for survival but for dignity and respect.

He's right. How can we talk about democracy when those who sacrificed the most for it are erased from the narrative? How can we build a just society when the very people who built it are ignored?

A house help, Rubi's story of loss is the story of countless mothers. Her son, Rana Talukder, was shot dead near Uttara East Police Station. Rubi's voice trembled as she recounted that fateful day: "He said he'd find Roni, his younger brother, and they'd return home together." Instead, she buried her son, Rana.

Her grief demands justice. The government must take responsibility for these deaths and provide real support to the bereaved families. And most importantly, we need accountability for the violence.

Beyond recognition: A call for justice

These stories demand more than empathy; they demand justice. As we honour the bravery of those who participated in the July uprising, let us remember that the path to a just Bangladesh lies in recognising every sacrifice, every struggle, and every silent hero.

We stand at a crossroads. We can choose to keep forgetting, or we can choose to remember -- not just the headlines, but the hidden faces of courage and sacrifice. Only then can we truly claim to be building a nation that belongs to everyone.

BOX: Recommendations

In light of the discussion, these five recommendations highlight urgent actions needed to uphold justice, ensure fairness, and support the marginalised:

Strengthen medical support

The injuries suffered during the uprising require long-term care. The Tk 1 lakh compensation provided by the July Foundation is woefully inadequate. The government must ensure proper financial aid, comprehensive medical treatment, and psychological support for the injured.

Regulate ambulance services

During the uprising, ambulance operators charged exorbitant rates due to a lack of regulation. This exploitation must end. The government should implement a standardised pricing system for emergency services and penalise those who take advantage of crises.

Include marginalised communities in national narratives

Recognise the contributions of marginalised groups in textbooks, monuments, and commemorations to promote inclusivity and fight classism.

Combat misinformation

The spread of false information during the uprising diluted the truth and harmed the victims. Media outlets should adopt strict fact-checking protocols, especially during crises.

Ensure justice for all victims

Conduct impartial investigations, ensure accountability for state violence, and create a transparent grievance system to expedite aid.

Ayman Anika *is a journalist at The Daily Star.*

Bridging Gaps in Support for the July Uprising Victims

MUJIB RAHMAN

The July Uprising stands as a watershed moment in Bangladesh's history, marking the beginning of a transformative period. This mass movement not only contributed to the nation's democratic aspirations but also brought unprecedented challenges, including widespread violence and casualties.

In response to this crisis, civil society, independent initiatives, and government agencies united to support the injured and bereaved families. However, despite these efforts, gaps in coordination and service delivery remain a major concern.

Volunteer Insights on the Crisis

During The Daily Star's 36 Days of July: Saluting the Bravehearts storytelling event, volunteers shared their experiences and challenges in aiding the victims. The session, titled Courage Amidst Crisis: Stories from Volunteers of the July Uprising, shed light on both their efforts and the systemic failures they encountered.

Lack of Coordination and Monitoring

Farhana Sharmin Emu, organiser of Visionary Voyage, highlighted the interim government's fragmented approach. While there were initial measures, such as forming a sub-committee under the health ministry to identify the injured and missing, these efforts lacked funding and inter-ministerial coordination.

"Three key ministries – health, social welfare, and labour – must work together, involving grassroots stakeholders. However, there's no framework to monitor or ensure accountability at the field level," she stated. She also emphasised the unequal treatment of injured protesters, noting that the poor and marginalised suffered disproportionately.

Barriers to Access

Volunteers such as Liyana Mahfuz from the Chattogram unit of Empowering Our Fighters platform described the logistical and financial hurdles faced by patients traveling to Dhaka for treatment. Despite government promises of free care, ancillary costs, such as transportation and accommodation, posed significant burdens. Furthermore, bureaucratic complexities, such as requiring multiple approvals for medical tests, exacerbated these challenges.

"Patients from low-income backgrounds face the greatest difficulties. They lack both financial resources and social networks to navigate the system," said Shakibur Rahman Rony, another volunteer.

Overlooked Groups

Shoilee Akhund of the Centre for Critical Discourse highlighted how certain vulnerable groups, such as street residents and mentally ill individuals, were excluded from the broader narrative of the uprising. She called for targeted efforts to document and support these overlooked populations.

"Unidentified victims, including those with intellectual disabilities, remain neglected. The government must employ techniques, such as the fingerprint method, to identify and support them," she said.

Lack of Information and Resources

Volunteers also pointed out the absence of a comprehensive database of injured and deceased individuals. Monisha Mafruha, organiser of Chobbisher Uttara, revealed alarming statistics from Uttara: out of 258 individuals, 49 were martyred, and 223 requested urgent assistance. Many faced additional barriers, such as limited computer literacy, which hindered their ability to apply for government aid.

Kaniz Fatima Mithila, an organiser of Loraku Chobbish, provided a deeply moving account of the struggles faced by volunteers and the injured. "We were mentally prepared to deal with critically injured people. However, our trauma began 40-45 days later when we saw people deteriorating due to mismanagement. Proper treatment from the start could have prevented many amputations," she said.

PHOTO: RASHED SHUMON/THE DAILY STAR

Representatives from volunteer organisations providing treatment to those injured in the July uprising share their experiences during the "Courage Amidst Crisis" talk on December 1, 2024. The event was part of The Daily Star's storytelling week and photo exhibition, "36 Days of July: Saluting the Bravehearts."

She emphasised the lack of a complete list of the injured or deceased, which continues to be a huge challenge for volunteers working to provide support. "The process of creating these lists is also concerning. These tasks require government coordination."

She also pointed out the duplication of efforts by volunteers. "There was a duplication of efforts, where multiple volunteer teams were working in the same hospital, depriving patients in other hospitals of support. The government should coordinate area-wise teams to avoid this. Each patient has unique requirements, and the government must identify individual needs and respond accordingly."

Every movement brings about significant crises, but the state must rise to the challenge of ensuring long-term rehabilitation for those affected. While private initiatives and civil society play a crucial role, the ultimate responsibility lies with the government to act decisively, mobilise resources, and establish robust systems of care.

The July Uprising was not just a turning point in Bangladesh's history but also a stark reminder of the collective responsibility required to support those who bear the cost of revolution. Without a unified and sustainable approach, the sacrifices of these brave individuals risk being forgotten.

Recommendations

To address these pressing issues and build a more resilient support system, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Enhanced Coordination Among Ministries: The health, social welfare, and labour ministries must work in tandem, guided by a central task force. This task force should oversee the implementation of measures, ensuring collaboration with grassroots organisations.
2. Creation of a Comprehensive Database: The government should prioritise developing a detailed database of injured and deceased individuals, using modern techniques such as biometric identification to include undocumented victims.
3. Streamlined Access to Services: Simplify procedures for accessing medical care and financial aid. Introducing digital platforms, similar to the COVID-19 Shurokkha app, can help victims and their families apply for assistance with minimal barriers.
4. Focus on Vulnerable Groups: Special programmes must be designed for street residents, mentally ill individuals, and other marginalised groups. These efforts should include advocacy and support networks tailored to their unique needs.
5. Capacity Building for Volunteers: The government should coordinate with civil society to train and deploy volunteers effectively. Area-wise teams can ensure equitable distribution of support, reducing duplication and enhancing efficiency.

Mujib Rahman *is a journalist and researcher.*

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Intellectuals of Bangladesh in and after 1971

The military view, which tends to see events primarily as a military conflict with Pakistan, still prevails. This account drives home the point that the freedom movement was ultimately a military duel.

SALIMULLAH KHAN

In the annals of the Bangladesh liberation war, let alone in a comprehensive history of the nation, a proper place of the intellectuals largely remains a desideratum. In the meantime, i.e., between 1971 and 1924, a variety of morbid phenomena have flourished, among them two histories of the liberation war. For the proclamation of independence (April 10, 1971), the cataclysmic events of the year stand all by themselves as a response to Pakistan's sudden and brutal military operation. The sudden and phenomenal election victories of Awami League in 1970-71, the founding event, erases all earlier national episodes.

A second narrative finds origins in the radical activities of the 1950s, and in the 1960s, when the country was led by the masses in an upsurge against the Pakistani regime and, a trifle later, when flags of freedom were seen flying in rallies giving a damn to the Awami League leadership. These two narratives, between themselves, define the political history of Bangladesh since 1971.

What Hasan Hafizur Rahman, prominent intellectual and editor of the first collection of documents relating to the war, scribbled in 1982 is indicative of the primordial dissension: "The principal consideration was to secure exact documents for exact events. We do not have any comment, we point towards nothing, we offer no explanations, no analysis of our own." This stasis is apparently a metaphor, i.e., a symptom, of what the primordial dichotomy eventually morphed to: civilian and military views of the liberation war.

The military view, which tends to see events primarily as a military conflict with Pakistan, still prevails. This account drives home the point that the freedom movement was ultimately a military duel. This argument's Achilles heel is plain enough: lacking comprehensiveness. A tree without roots rarely tempts you, subjects supposed to know.

The other narrative stresses the political nature of popular participation in myriad forms. In its absence, intellectuals appear rather as a frivolity, a missing link for that matter in the chain of events. With the supreme leader capitulating in the long night of 'Operation Searchlight,' almost all unprepared, inefficient, civilian cohorts catapulting into exile, who would deny the dismal nature of politics? Besides, many of these men were plain corrupt and, in the opinion of many, "the country won liberation not because of the civilian political leadership, but in spite of them."

Intellectual actors, however, claim a central place in the martyrology of national resistance, in the history of the struggle for cultural and political autonomy over two decades in old Pakistan, between 1952 and 1971. This narrative even endows intellectuals with a powerful founding myth: featuring student martyrs of 1952 and teacher, doctor, lawyer, journalist, and myriad professional victims of 1971 in the great drama that short-circuited the illusion that was old Pakistan.

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA/THE DAILY STAR

Why Pakistan collapsed? For a simple (not simplistic) answer, we recall Antonio Gramsci's take on the Russian revolution (1917), in terms of state and civil society. Czarist Russia was only a special case, thought Gramsci, where economic crisis proved necessary and sufficient for erupting a successful revolutionary crisis. State and the civil society there entangled in an unjust relationship; intellectuals remaining primordial and gelatinous, it was the state which was everything.

The Russians won a lightning 'war of maneuver' without even rehearsing for a 'war of position' (siege warfare) because the Czarist state lacked a cultural fortress, powerful enough to win over an irate and hungry populace. The post-Czar regime of Kerensky also fell for the same reason: it hardly had time to even lay foundations of a new fortress. In Western Europe, contrarily, prevailed an equilibrium between the state and civil society; when the state trembled a robust structure of civil society surfaced. In this perspective, Pakistan in 1971 looked more like Russia and less like the West.

It began, soon after a caesarean birth, to lose hegemony, effective control over the intellectuals, over culture, public opinion and in a word over the illusion of popular sovereignty. It faced, in other words, an 'organic crisis' risking the fabric of the 'historical block'—structure as well as superstructure—that in the first place brought the nation-state into being, with no civil society rearing head.

In Bangladesh, despite appearances, the social revolution in making is likely not repeating the Pakistan experience. For, thanks to the war of liberation, the 'war of maneuver' is going around ever more as a 'war of position.' It bears stressing that "a state wins a war to the extent to which it prepares itself in peacetime." Where is this 'war of position,' the struggle for hegemony, more readily fought? Mostly in the vast terrains of civil society, those massive superstructures of modern bureaucracies, the 'trenches' of civil society. A struggle for hegemony thus turns into a 'war of attrition.' Antonio Gramsci wryly observes, "no social form is ever willing to confess that it has been superseded."

The struggle for class consciousness thus demands intellectuals. That infamous apathy of the masses, what the left used to dub 'false consciousness,' is not determined by structures (economic conditions) as by superstructures (cultural relations). It is more or less a product traditional intellectual hegemony. On the other hand, winning over traditional intellectuals by workers marks a victory of organic intellectuals.

Awakening to class consciousness (becoming hegemonic) is the product of a struggle led by organic intellectuals of competing social classes. Asserts Gramsci: "A human mass does not 'distinguish' itself and does not become independent 'by itself' without organizing itself (in a broad sense), and there is no organization without intellectuals,... without organizer and leaders..."

For Gramsci, political parties comprise three layers: a first layer of true believers, a second layer of political entrepreneurs (organic intellectuals) and a third layer of the ruling class or political leadership. "All three layers are necessary for a party but the organizational backbone is the second layer," a Gramsci scholar has put it. One function of intellectuals is achieving what the oft-cited, poorly taken, term hegemony signifies: the capacity to lead without coercion or with coercion plus legitimacy.

Successions of civilian to military, military-sponsored, and interim (not intermediate) regimes in Bangladesh are clearly a symptom of the failure to build on avowed premises of liberal hegemony: equity, human dignity and social justice. The latest autocracy, a manifestation of late fascism, in Bangladesh was no less than a direct result of this weak hegemony. The missing 'spontaneous' consent in civil society was responsible for obliging the fledgling state to resort to both plunder and murder.

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The Pen Against Power in the Fight for Justice

Panelists discuss the role of writers and poets in the post-uprising era during the "Write to Protest" session, organised on December 7 as part of the "36 Days of July: Saluting the Bravehearts" exhibition, hosted by The Daily Star.

PHOTO: PALASH KHAN/THE DAILY STAR

In a country emerging from 15 years of suppression, what should be the role of a writer in the new era? Additionally, is it solely the writer's duty to speak the truth, be the voice of the deprived, and stand for the nation when freedom is compromised?

EMRAN MAHFUZ

On the brink of victory in 1971, as the masses fought for freedom, Pakistanis stained December 14 with the blood of the nation's leading educators, journalists, doctors, and writers. Since then, the day has been marked as Intellectuals' Day, a reminder that true intellectuals, regardless of their beliefs, fearlessly speak and write the truth against injustice. It's important to remember that a society without questions is doomed to fall into darkness. In 1971, the intellectuals took on this crucial role.

Yet, for many years in Bangladesh, a large segment of intellectuals chose not to speak up for the people. Fear, a desire to stay close to power, and the allure of material gain often kept their voices silent. They avoided criticizing the policies and plans of the autocratic regime. This echoes the words of Nabarun Bhattacharya, who once said: "This valley of death is not my country." He continues, "The teacher, intellectual, poet, or clerk who does not seek revenge for these murders in broad daylight—I despise them."

July this year became a month of profound despair for the youth. What began as a peaceful movement quickly turned into a scene of brutal violence. Lives were lost, potential was cut short, yet the majority of university professors, journalists, and editors chose to remain silent. The poet who once wrote "The country rides the strange camel's back" is no longer with us, while those who once spoke out against tyranny either stay silent or exploit the situation, turning into mere court poets.

In public universities alone, there are 15,236 teachers, including 4,661 professors. What keeps them so occupied? Hundreds of students have expressed their frustration at the silence of their academic leaders. Those who stood with the youth during this time are the true source of strength. Since independence, our society has failed to produce another martyr like Shamsuzzoha, as the temptations of power and material gain have prevailed.

At one event, a senior journalist openly declared, "We stand with Sheikh Hasina, ready to do anything if needed," exposing the alignment between journalists and the ruling power, much like the role of the Chhatra League. Yet, where are they now? All have vanished, leaving behind a "marketplace of the blind." Wealth has been squandered, while countless lives are left forgotten. Sycophancy has infected journalism, prompting harsh condemnation from the new generation.

What responsibilities do writers bear in a post-uprising era? To explore this question, The Daily Star hosted a discussion titled "Write to Protest" at the "36 July: Saluting the Fearless" exhibition on December 7. The exhibition featured photographs, videos, and news reports that captured the unwavering courage, resilience, and sacrifices of the student-citizen movement during the July uprising.

The discussants raised a profound question: In a country emerging from 15 years of suppression, what should be the role of a writer in the new era? Additionally, is it solely the writer's duty to speak the truth, be the voice of the deprived, and stand for the nation when freedom is compromised?

The session was chaired by academic and researcher Wakil Ahmed. Panelists included lyricist Shahidullah Farazi, novelists Ahmad Mostafa Kamal, Afsana Begum, Mohammad Nazim Uddin, poet Monirul Monir, and novelist Sabbir Jadid.

Sabbir Jadid shared, "I couldn't say much about Sheikh Hasina's autocratic rule. I wrote stories about RAB's crossfires but couldn't publish them as books. Writers cannot express themselves freely without liberty. We endured such difficult times. We demand freedom to speak and write."

Mohammad Nazim Uddin remarked, "Who should a writer seek freedom from? Freedom of expression is a fundamental right. When it is wdevelopment narratives peddled by the Awami League were lies, and we didn't challenge them. Not everyone remained silent for benefits; some genuinely aligned their ideals with the government. As writers, our duty was to awaken the people's voice. We failed, betraying our responsibilities. Some became silent collaborators of the regime's agenda. This was unacceptable. Now, we must do the opposite. Whoever assumes power must be questioned."

Who should a writer seek freedom from? Freedom of expression is a fundamental right. When it is curtailed, resistance must follow. However, the development narratives peddled by the Awami League were lies, and we didn't challenge them. Not everyone remained silent for benefits; some genuinely aligned their ideals with the government. As writers, our duty was to awaken the people's voice. We failed, betraying our responsibilities.

National Book Centre Director Afsana Begum agreed, stating, "Writers are the mirror of society. We are accountable to our future generations to document the truth, provide platforms for dialogue and understanding, and record current realities. Writers' roles must always remain clear. They are the voice of the people, and that voice must never be suppressed."

Poet Monirul Monir questioned, "Have we fulfilled our responsibilities as writers? During a fascist regime, when resistance was most critical, did we truly stand up? Do we, even now, have plans to confront oppression in society?"

Lyricist Shahidullah Farazi paid tribute to the martyrs of the July uprising, saying, "Even children opened our eyes and shamed us. Students sacrificed their lives to safeguard our freedom. What have we, as writers, done for them? Can we write for them? Remaining silent day after day is worse than dying on the front lines."

He added, "The Liberation War was fought for equality, human dignity, and justice. Following the July movement, Bangladesh must be built on the foundations of equality, dignity, and justice."

Bangladesh Open University Vice-Chancellor Saeed Ferdous echoed Farazi's sentiments, stating, "In the future, intellectuals must undergo rigorous self-reflection. Writing against visible enemies is easy; confronting hypocrisy or invisible adversaries is far more challenging. Yet, we must speak and write without compromise."

Ahmad Mostafa Kamal proposed changing the title of the discussion from "The Writer's Responsibility" to "The Writer's Duty Post-Uprising" for greater clarity. He added, "After Sheikh Hasina's departure, the country went three days without formal law and order, yet chaos never ensued. The people protected one another, showcasing our collective ability to safeguard the nation. We must ensure that fascism never takes root here again."

He outlined three urgent tasks for the interim government: dismantle market syndicates, restore law and order, and properly prosecute criminals. He stressed that the public will not tolerate political manipulation by leaders. Once these are addressed, the country should proceed to elections, transferring power to a democratic government.

Concluding the discussion, Wakil Ahmed emphasised the importance of writers in the uprising, stating, "I've stayed home for 15 years, uninvited. I've become disconnected from the younger generation and rely on newspapers to know what's happening. Still, the progress of our youth is astonishing. The success of the July uprising will be written for the future."

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The article is translated by **Kaniz Fatema Mithila**