



# 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



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."

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.

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:

- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.
- 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.