

‘The July uprising was about truth and justice’

In July–August 2024, a student-led mass uprising swept across Bangladesh, culminating in the fall of an autocratic regime spanning more than 15 years. A year on, three of the female protesters who took part in the movement on the streets—Nasita Binte Nasir, Lamisha Jaman, and Kameliya Sharmin Chura—share first-hand accounts of resistance and survival with Mahiya Tabassum of The Daily Star.

‘The bullet passed right by me’

Initially, I was hesitant to join the movement. On July 16, I tried to take part in a demonstration organised by a political party, but their behaviour was intimidating and made me feel unsafe. But things changed the next day. I spoke with a group of student protesters, independent from any platform, who made me feel reassured. With their encouragement, I joined a rally in Uttara in the morning.

On July 18, private university students from all over Dhaka decided to mobilise together, coordinating through social media. A few of my friends came to my place early in the morning, and around 9am or 10am, we headed out. Violent clashes were already being reported, but I still couldn't believe that state forces would open fire on unarmed student protesters.

We, the former students of Rajuk Uttara Model College, joined the protest rally in front of the establishment. As clashes intensified and more students were injured, we—especially the female protesters—took on the role of medics. We tried to get supplies from the nearby Lazz Pharma, but they refused to sell us anything. When the violence escalated further, they shut down completely.

Police officers began firing rubber bullets into the crowd. There were armoured personnel carriers around

us. Then, out of nowhere, a military tank rolled into view, sweeping through the road and firing indiscriminately. It was the first time I had ever seen a tank up close. The sheer violence of it—the disregard for human life—shocked me to my core.

In that chaos, a bullet flew right past me and struck a young woman just a few metres behind. I had spoken to her only moments earlier. Other protesters quickly carried her to a hospital. She survived, but was seriously injured. Another protester wasn't as lucky. A police bullet hit him in the eye. He didn't survive.

Everything happened so fast. When the military tank entered the scene, panic took over. We began running in every direction, trying to find safety. But even that was difficult. Many of us sought shelter at nearby buildings, only to find locked gates and terrified residents unwilling to help. Most buildings had shut their doors to keep us out. We were left exposed while a military tank roamed the street to “clear” the area.

At one point, a building guard handed us a few sticks to defend ourselves, though we knew they were almost useless. Still, we took them. We focused our energy towards helping the wounded, continuing to collect supplies and administering basic first aid to anyone who needed it.



Nasita Binte Nasir (left), a former Rajuk Uttara Model College student, in a rally in Uttara protesting the killing of students during the July uprising in 2024. Later, this photo went viral.

SOURCE: PROTHOM ALO

After that day, every Rajuk student I knew was mobilised. We kept returning to the streets, day after day, organising more rallies.

Then came the photo. Someone took a picture of me mid-slogan, standing in the pouring rain, and it went viral. Overnight, I

started receiving death threats. My inbox was filled with messages from strangers. Some people tracked me down on social media, sending vile

and threatening messages.

I had to deactivate my Facebook account for safety. But I opened a new one to stay in touch with other protesters and to help coordinate actions.

That viral photo also led to wild speculations. Suddenly, people online were calling me a BNP field activist. Others tried to recruit me into various political parties, assuming I had political ambitions. But I refused every offer. I never had interest in politics before; I don't have it now.

I never wanted the limelight. I didn't join the protests to be seen or praised. The movement was not about fame or political alignment. It was about truth and justice. I will take to the streets again if I must—but not under the banner of any party. I don't need a political affiliation to stand for what is right.

Oddly enough, I felt more secure during the protests than I did afterwards. After August 5, the fear became constant. I started hearing from people close to me that various political groups were trying to find out where I was—trying to locate me.

Even though the regime has changed, I still don't feel safe.

Nasita Binte Nasir
Undergraduate student, Islamic University of Technology (IUT)

‘I felt the horror in my bones’

On July 15 last year, a photo of two students carrying another injured protester on the Dhaka University campus went viral. That was the day members of Bangladesh Chhatra League (BCL), student wing of the then ruling party, attacked students protesting at DU. I was on my way to the airport to see off a relative, but as news of the attacks started pouring in, we made a split-second decision to turn around and head to DU.

I didn't get caught in any clashes that day, but it was the first time I witnessed the reality on the ground. The tension in the air, the fear, the resistance—it all felt raw and urgent. By July 16, I was fully immersed in the protests, chanting slogans alongside fellow students. I vividly remember shouting, “*Chhi chhi Hasina, lojjay bachi na*,” when a few of the rally organisers—some of whom are now at the forefront of National Citizen Party (NCP)—asked me not to raise such slogans. They claimed this protest was about quota reform, not against any particular regime or leader.

On July 18, school and college students in the Farmgate area came out on the streets, having coordinated with me the previous night. Initially, we were gathering in groups of three-four so as not to draw any attention. But soon, we felt safe enough to move in a large group. So around 400-500 students, all in uniforms, united in Farmgate and started a protest rally, moving towards Asad Gate via Manik Mia Avenue.

On Manik Mia Avenue, police opened fire on us. Students were breaking branches off from the nearby trees to defend themselves. Then we negotiated with the police that they would let us lead the rally towards Mirpur Road. By the time we got on Mirpur Road, a huge group of BCL activists rushed to the spot from Lalmatia, carrying sharp weapons, chasing the uniform-wearing students.

Police also started firing blank shots, as well as tear shells and sound grenades. The students dispersed and started running in different directions. That day, I faced the largest number of tear shells among all the days of July uprising. We started applying toothpaste all over our faces and tried to take shelter in the nearby buildings.



PHOTO: COURTESY

Lamisha Jaman, a Jahangirnagar student, carries spatula and brick to defend herself against the lethal force carried out by law enforcers and BCL on Dhaka University campus during July protests in 2024.

At Dhanmondi Road 27, I saw some students of Holy Cross College in front of a building beside Rapa Plaza, pleading with the people inside to open the gate and let them in. But no one inside agreed to give them shelter, saying they would get in trouble. A few of the students fell heavily sick due to the tear shells and were having breathing difficulties.

Then someone from upstairs called us and we noticed an emergency exit. We went upstairs via that and saw that a beauty parlour was giving shelter to a large number of people, crammed into a small room. There were women, senior citizens, children crying and praying.

Then I got calls and learnt that

300-350 more students were stuck in Rapa Plaza and another adjacent building. Then someone called me and said one of the students I knew had gotten shot with two bullets and needed to be taken to a hospital immediately. She was taken to at least six to seven hospitals—not a single one agreed to provide medical assistance. Then finally they found a hospital near Farmgate that took her in. She survived, but was traumatised for life.

While I was sitting there, crammed in the small dark room with others, I received another call, learning that a student from Dhaka Residential Model College (DRMC) had been fatally shot near Dhanmondi 27.

We decided to keep calm and plan for an escape. We started calling media houses because we were under the impression that if the incident got coverage, we would be spared. I called my elder sister—she was already in another protest. She just said, “Calling you in a minute, I am running.” Then I heard a gunshot and the call dropped. I started screaming and crying and that was the first time I felt the horror in my bones. Every second felt like hours, filled with pain and horror till I could confirm that she was alright.

We kept reaching out for help, but no one came. We were advised to leave in a large group, but none of us felt safe doing so. The clashes continued for nearly six hours. We called the Mohammadpur and Dhanmondi police stations, but they said they couldn't help us either—the situation was spiralling out of control.

Eventually, teachers from the DRMC and an official from St. Joseph Higher Secondary School came to rescue their students. A DU faculty member also came. We begged them to take other students too, regardless of which school they belonged to. Surprisingly, no teacher or official from Holy Cross came, even after they were informed about their students' situation.

To prepare for the escape, we split into groups. Staff from a nearby business donated spare clothes, allowing many students to change out of their uniforms into civilian clothes so they wouldn't get targeted or arrested.

By around 4:30pm, the last student was escorted out of that room. Then I, along with a few close friends, stepped outside.

What we saw was devastating: tyres burning, streets littered with abandoned sandals, pools of blood, chunks of flesh. It looked like a war zone.

Walking away from that scene felt like stepping into a second life—an escape from death, a breath stolen back from chaos. And though our bodies were exhausted and our spirits shaken, we knew this was not the end. The fight was only just beginning.

Lamisha Jaman
Undergraduate student, Jahangirnagar University

‘I couldn't stay away from the protests’

Although I had the privilege of using the quota system, I was active during the 2018 quota reform movement because I didn't want any discrimination. But the protest in 2018 was only about quota; it didn't address the broader discrimination faced by marginalised communities. When the quota reform protests resurfaced in 2024, I wasn't part of it initially.

But everything changed on July 15. A protest rally of students had reached the VC bungalow in Jahangirnagar University (JU) when police, along with a group of BCL activists carrying weapons, attacked the students. The clash between protesters and the police-BCL members turned violent, and students took shelter in the VC bungalow. There was a blackout throughout the campus and our students got cornered with no safe escape route.

I couldn't just watch. I had to step out and join the protest, even as the police charged at us.

That night, as police and BCL activists attacked us, I saw a Facebook live broadcast from the VC Bungalow showing our trapped students. After watching that, I knew I had to act. I took the bell from my resident hall—the one we use for emergencies and warnings—and walked through the balconies of Pritilata hall.

I hammered that bell with everything I had and called everyone to gather, to step out and rescue our students. The sound echoed across the dormitory, and something extraordinary happened. A huge group of female students poured out of the hall and marched with me towards the VC bungalow to rescue the trapped protesters.

That became one of the most significant moments of the July protests on the JU campus. Without those female students that night, it would have been impossible to face the clashes head-on.

There are so many incidents from July–August 2024 that I can never erase from my memory. The images are burnt in my mind, instances where I had to jump over a dead body just to take shelter from the violent clashes raging around us on August 5. I saw so many corpses, so much blood. The trauma hasn't left me.

During the uprising, several of our teachers—who have since fled the country—called us, especially targeting female students like me. They threatened to inform our parents and suspend us from the university if we continued participating in the protests. But those intimidation tactics were nothing compared to the challenges we face in today's Bangladesh.

The bitter truth about our current situation is this: we toppled the fascist regime, but we couldn't bring it to justice. We fought against discrimination, but in today's Bangladesh, we're witnessing discrimination everywhere we look. The corruption, the extortion—it's all happening openly now. The very cause we bled for, we couldn't achieve it.

In this “*noya bondobosto*,” discrimination has simply been repackaged, following the same rotten patterns we thought we had destroyed. I have never felt this unsafe before, both as a woman and as someone who is an artiste. The rise of ultraconservatism has put people like us at risk.

The revolution we fought for feels incomplete, hollow even. We paid in blood for change, but what we got was just a reshuffling of the same oppressive deck.

Kameliya Sharmin Chura
Undergraduate student, Jahangirnagar University