



OUR HAPPY PLACE



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From howling “Mama, duita shingara” to frantically skimming through bio notes at the last minute for next period’s test to bunking math and jamming with a guitar and dudh cha by the staircase – cafeterias not only occupy an enormous space on our school/university grounds but also in our hearts (because who doesn’t know that the way to our hearts are through our stomachs?).

Overlooked as part of the background, the significance of campus cafeterias are lost amidst the other highpoints and milestones in a student’s life, like the football field, the debate room and everything else that moulds our future. The cafeteria may not make the cut in our CVs and applications, but it shoots straight to the heart, creating unforgettable memories. It creates and encourages memories that make student life blissful during the long class hours, peer pressure and teachers whose lectures drag on.

The cafeteria nurtures the kid with both working parents, unable to make time to put together a sandwich before school. It feeds all the rest too, with the Shawarma Sundays, and Tehari Tuesdays – mouthwatering delights that lift some burden off the dreary 8-periods-a-day demanding cycle.

“I’m a person who looks for excuses to skip school, but never on Mondays. Monday is tehari day,” says Nafisa Subah, a 9th grader, on the significance of the cafeteria to her. What a momentous appeal it must hold, to have strained, drained pupils get up at the crack of dawn and come

to school on their own desire.

Something about the cafeteria makes its food incomparably desirable, even when it always isn’t. Sanyat Rabby, a Dhaka University graduate, says, “I remember the food in my cafeteria being unpalatable, but I still loved it.” Perhaps the magic is in some secret spice or maybe it’s the feeling of respite and freedom from the seemingly never-ending econ class. Perhaps it’s the setting – the ambiance of the cafeteria, buzzing of your peers all around, and some distant chatter over a geometry problem – that drives our appetites crazy.

Cafeterias make it possible to watch Dhaka vs Sri Lanka test series peacefully the night before a test, knowing there’s going to be a round table with four chairs, and a steaming cup of mama’s dudh cha waiting to help prepare for next period’s chemistry mocks. “The potent dose of caffeine during study sessions at the cafeteria was my favorite,” says Faizan Yameen, “It did wonders in keeping me awake through three entire semesters.”

The cafeteria provides an opportunity to the

introvert boy in class, to widen his horizons. That kid whose outlooks never quite paralleled his peers’ found folks he could socialise with among juniors and seniors in the crowded cafeterias. “I may sit alone through all the classes,” says Rian Rahman*, “But at the corner of the canteen, I found my best friends – a 12th grader and a 10th grader – both seniors and ‘loners’ like me.” He says that the cafeteria is his ‘happy place’, one that gets him excited about school.

The cafeteria is also the venue of ‘first dates’ for many young couples in school, and many more to come. It provides the perfect fried rice and ice cream date that makes relationships official. “I don’t have any class with my boyfriend,” says Raisa Rahman* a 9th grader. “However, the cafeteria allows 30 minutes and the perfect location to spend time with him,” she adds. Abrar Ahmed* looks back on his school days and says, “My girlfriend at the time, like most girls around, had strict parents. I thank the cafeteria for granting us the closest things to ‘dates’ I experienced in my school days.” Cafeterias wiggle their way into many of our everyday stories, leaving prominent

marks on them, even when merely being the background.

Cafeterias bring out the open-minded sides of students too. It’s a place that overcomes boundaries of class as the cafeteria food vendors become our beloved ‘mama’. “I’ve probably asked the ‘Cafeteria Mama’ more questions than I asked my teachers (mama, chop ase?),” says Shafat Shudipto. “I’m pretty sure he knows me better than my homeroom teacher does,” he adds. The cafeteria mama becomes the most important person in your life, as you push through a sea of people to hold your claim over the last piece of shawarma.

Cafeterias provide a hub for gossip, drama and news. Along with hot meals, it stirs up all kinds of hot adda sessions on campus. “You get to meet people from different faculties at the university cafeteria, people you wouldn’t otherwise bump into on the vast campus,” says Aonindo Asif. “With so many open discussions going on, it provides an opportunity to learn things and widen your horizons with people sharing similar interests. And the free wifi is pretty

good too,” he adds. According to him, the cafeteria holds many bittersweet memories, the sweetest of all being a piping hot plate of khichuri at 20 taka only.

“A cafeteria is an inseparable part of school life,” Mashiyat Nayeem muses, “It’s that special little place that manages to get the best of the lively spirits of the students when the rest of the school is not being generous with joy.” School and university cafeterias remain the shred of fun students unconsciously clutch onto. It makes student lives bearable.

Somewhere between running after the aloo’r chop and running after job opportunities, we all grow up. The 20 taka tehari dates turn into 2000 taka dinners at posh restaurants. Bur our school and university cafeterias, they stay with us, etched somewhere at the back of our minds as jolly memories and happy places.

**Names were changed as per interviewees’ requests.*

Samin Sabah Islam is on a quest to find the perfect diet while simultaneously drooling over pizza. Throw her some tips at sabhasamin11@gmail.com



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