

OFF CAMPUS

Adjusting aspirations and adapting to changes: Life after cadet college

ADRIN SARWAR

What's the first thing that comes to mind when you meet an ex-cadet? Do you assume that they're boring or maybe a little rude? Or perhaps someone who is athletic and has a solid grasp on most things? These impressions are often shaped by limited interactions, which culminate to form stereotypes. But how accurate are they? More importantly, how does it impact the students who are being judged?

Md Mahmudul Hasan Sumon, a final-year undergraduate student of Printing and Publication Studies at Dhaka University (DU) and ex-cadet from Rangpur Cadet College, shares, "Both my classmate and I needed a lot of time to break the ice. Even now, in my final year, I don't have many friends outside my cadet college circle. I try to maintain balanced connections in class, but some classmates have told me that they initially found it difficult to communicate with me."

This sentiment resonates with many ex-cadets who struggle to adjust after leaving the regimented environment of cadet college and transitioning to other institutions.

A cadet begins their journey in class seven, spending six formative years immersed in a structured lifestyle. For most, these years are among the best of their lives, marked by deep friendships, camaraderie, and a strong sense of belonging. Md Moinul Islam, a student at the Institute of Business Administration, Dhaka University (IBA, DU) and ex-cadet from Mirzapur Cadet College, recalls, "It felt like diving into a new world, though the routine was challenging. We had little to worry about in a broader sense. Our schedules were predetermined, and we knew the consequences of our actions. But the world outside is different."

"People started calling me 'major' after I joined cadet college. Initially, I planned to join the armed forces to fulfil my father's dream. But in class nine, during a career session with an ex-cadet from The World Bank, we were encouraged to explore other opportunities. That session changed my perspective, and I decided to aim for IBA."

While Moinul struggled with the uncertainty of change, others, like Nawshin Islam Bonna a student at the Institute of Education and Research, DU, and an ex-cadet of Joypurhat Girls' Cadet College, faced mental health challenges. "Leaving cadet life was one of the saddest phases of my life. The mornings and evenings were never the same again. How could I spend a day without the faces I had been with for six years? It significantly impacted my mental health, especially due to the pressure of admission tests looming. Thankfully, my parents supported me through this difficult time, helping me prepare for the future. My parents were my main source of strength"

The difficulty of the transition is a common experience for most ex-cadets as they leave behind a place, they once called home. Moinul elaborates, "A

lot of cadets experience something akin to Stockholm syndrome. Both the good and bad memories resurface. But over time, you adapt. You make new friends, set new goals, and find a new rhythm to life."

It is common to assume that cadet college alumni will pursue a career in the military, but not every cadet dreams of donning the uniform. "Like most cadets, I said yes to joining the military in grades seven and eight. Even in grade 12, when the then Chief of Army asked me, I said yes but that wasn't entirely true," Moinul remarked. "By grade 10, I had decided to study at IBA, DU. Since then, I never seriously considered the military or government services."

For others, the allure of the military career faded as time went on. Mezbah UI Islam, trade marketing



specialist at Coca Cola Icecek (CCI) Bangladesh and ex-cadet from Jhenidah

Cadet College reflects, "People started calling me 'major' after I joined cadet college. Initially, I planned to join the armed forces to fulfil my father's dream. But in class nine, during a career session with an ex-cadet from The World Bank, we were encouraged to explore other opportunities. That session changed my perspective, and I decided to aim for IBA."

On the other hand, Nirjhor*, an officer of the Bangladesh Army, had a different path. "I never planned on joining the army. I even hated the idea of it. I used to think about spending my days at DU, TSC, and university campuses. I wanted to be a doctor and help people. It was something both my dad and I wanted. However, peer influence prompted me to leave my medical aspirations behind and join the army. I wanted to become self-dependent quickly, and the military seemed like the right option. I kept regretting those three years at the Bangladesh Military Academy (BMA) because I loved sleeping. Ever since my cadet life began, however, I have had to wake up at 5 AM."

Adjusting to life after cadet college is often a challenge for ex-cadets accustomed to the routine. Moinul notes, "Though I wish I could return to those days, cadet life was a small, insular world. The reality outside is much more complex. But somehow, we manage."

Nirjhor echoes this sentiment. "In cadet college, we

said what we felt. But outside, there's a gap between what you say and how people interpret it. It makes life more complicated."

Even mundane aspects like food and transportation can become hurdles. Sumon shares, "We used to have very well-maintained, balanced daily meals. On some days, we had special meals. We had dedicated teachers and staff to ensure the quality of food. So we never really had to worry about meals. But after starting university, I had a tough time adjusting to the food arrangement. There were times when I was 10 minutes late for lunch and the food had run out at the canteen. Whereas in cadet college, the meal was laid down on the table. All we had to do was sit and have our lunch. After I started living on my own outside the campus, I even had to find restaurants in search of a better daily meal. The beginnings of my undergrad were extra troublesome because of this."

With these bittersweet memories, all cadets move on to the next

ILLUSTRATION: RAKEEB RAZZAQ

stage of their lives, carrying the lessons, friendships, and resilience they gained during their cadet years. It also prepares cadets for the challenges of the world outside. The bonds formed during that time stays strong, shaping a unique identity that every cadet holds close. No matter where life takes them – whether it's the military, corporate offices, or other fields – they remain part of one big community.

Reflecting on the cadet experience, Mezbah shares a word of advice for aspiring cadets. "Cadet colleges make you an all-rounder, not a specialist," he explains. "If you want to be just a scientist, musician, or sportsman, cadet college might not be the best fit. But if you want to explore all of these options at once, cadet college is the right place for you."

His words capture the essence of cadet life – a place where students are not only prepared academically and physically but also encouraged to grow into versatile and adaptable individuals. While it's not easy, this experience lays a foundation that helps cadets succeed in whatever path they choose.

*Name has been changed upon request

Adrin Sarwar is a final-year student and really trying hard to get out of writer's block. You can send her inspirations at adrinsarwar@gmail.com