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## The unnerving reality of school and college students

# LIVING IN HOSTELS

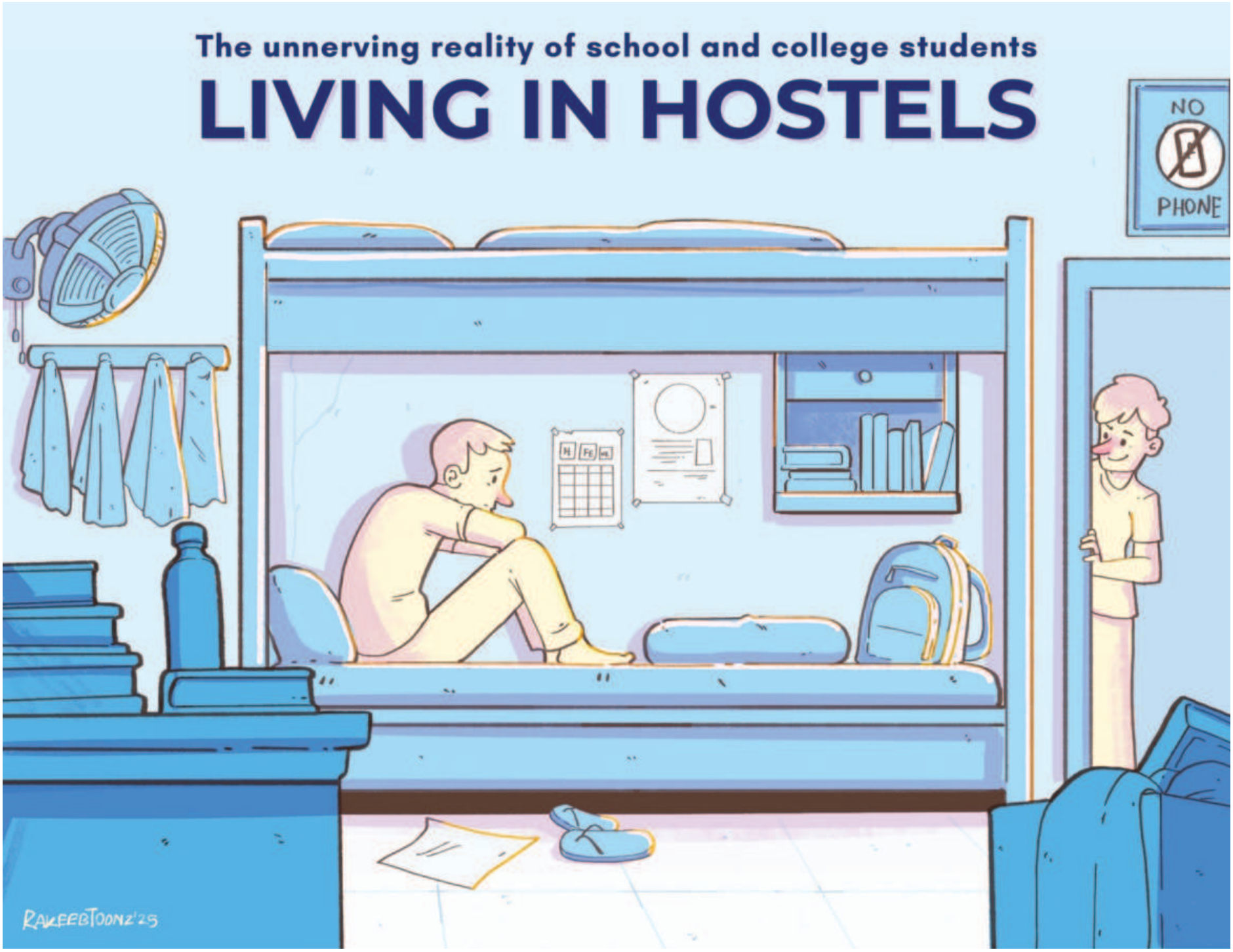


ILLUSTRATION: **RAKEEB RAZZAQ**

# OVER & OUT!:
# Bangladeshi 90's nostalgia turned into a video game

**SADI MOHAMMAD SHAHNEWAZ**

PHOTOS: **COURTESY**

In a small, sun-bleached neighbourhood somewhere in the mid-'90s South Asia, two boys spend their afternoons the way many of us once did — tinkering with half-broken toys, scavenging for wires, and treating the *elaka* like their own backyard, as it should be. That is the world Auleek—a 3D art outsourcing studio in Bangladesh — attempts to bottle in *Over & Out!* — an upcoming single-player adventure that is less about quests and more about the tender, everyday drama of childhood.

The conflict is pretty familiar: one of the boys is moving away, and the last week they have together becomes a quiet race against time to build a radio tower that might keep their voices connected when the world doesn't.

The premise sounds simple, but *Over & Out!* approaches it with the kind of sincerity usually reserved for coming-of-age films. Each chapter of the game focuses on a different toy the boys repair together—spinning tops, fishing games, kites — objects that, in the hands of children, become entire universes. These toys are not nostalgia props so much as emotional milestones; each one marks the boys inching closer to their looming separation.

The developers have structured the game like a memory you slowly walk back into: a prologue that eases players into the neighbourhood, three main chapters that layer its rhythms and routines, and an epilogue that lands the story's emotional blow once the tower is finally complete.

Instead of relying on broad aesthetic clichés of the decade, *Over & Out!* leans into the intimate details that

defined pre-digital childhood in this part of the world. Cassette tapes with handwritten labels. Walkie-talkies that only worked after a few hits on the side. Snail mail that took weeks but felt immediate in the heart.

The environment is not flashy — it's familiar. It includes narrow apartment corridors, rickety rooftops where kites got stuck, and neighbours which oscillate between endearing and mildly exasperating. It is the kind of place where two ten-year-olds could vanish for hours and return with pockets full of screws, bottle caps, and ideas.

Mechanically, the game operates on a loop that mirrors the boys' partnership: one scavenges, the other crafts. Fixing a toy becomes as important as building the radio tower, not because of the object itself, but because of the time spent together doing it.

Mini-games, light crafting, and exploration keep the pacing gentle but purposeful. Nothing feels rushed, because nothing in childhood ever did, until the moment everything changes.

Auleek is currently in the core systems development stage, with a short prototype already capturing the tone they're heading toward. The full release, planned for late 2026, promises expanded environments, fully voiced storylines, character animations, and a crafting system that remains intentionally small-scale, reflecting the modest ambitions of the world it inhabits. If you're interested, you can add *Over & Out!* to your wishlist on Steam right now. That way, you can get notified when the game becomes available.

In many ways, *Over & Out!* is not just a game about two children trying to stay in touch. It's a portrait of a generation that learned to build connections with whatever we had lying around — wires, cardboard, bottle caps, or simply the determination to hear a friend's voice on the other end of static.

It asks a simple question, one many of us carry quietly into adulthood: *What did we do when life first taught us that people could move away?*

# Carbon neutrality EXPLAINED

**ZABIN TAZRIN NASHITA**

Not very long ago, an eight-month-old baby boy named Ayaan Khan Ruhab made history as Bangladesh's first carbon-neutral baby. The news was celebrated everywhere, and rightfully so, as his parents had planted 580 trees in the Satkhira district to offset the carbon footprint associated with the baby's life. Previously, Aadavi from Tamil Nadu, India, was recognised as the world's first carbon-neutral child last year.

Most of us have heard about the term "carbon neutrality" more or less, although not a lot of us are familiar with the concept or its importance. Carbon neutrality essentially refers to the balance between the absorption and emission of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere. In simpler terms, you, as a person, will emit a lot of carbon dioxide into the atmosphere throughout your life. All living organisms, including humans, emit the gas due to respiration, but humans contribute more to the emission of carbon in other ways too. Burning fossil fuels, creating waste, and through agriculture, we produce large amounts of carbon dioxide, and the measure of this amount of emission is known as our carbon footprint.

The concept of carbon neutrality extends beyond individuals. In fact, it's more important for corporations and large business organisations to be carbon neutral than individuals. Industrial procedures consume lots of energy, which is directly linked to the burning of fossil fuels and carbon dioxide emissions. So, corporations contribute much more heavily to carbon emissions than humans. In recent times, many companies have pledged to become carbon neutral, including giants like Google, Microsoft, and Unilever.

In order to become carbon neutral, it's essential to track the emissions first and then offset them by creating carbon sinks or other sustainable practices. A carbon sink is a natural or artificial system that absorbs more carbon dioxide from the air than it releases into the atmosphere. Trees, plants, and algae undergo photosynthesis by absorbing carbon dioxide from the air. As such, forests, oceans, and grasslands are known as natural carbon sinks. Thus, one of the simplest ways to achieve carbon neutrality is by planting trees, which is what Ayaan's parents have done in order to offset his carbon footprint.

While discussing this topic, there are a few more terms you may hear that are relevant to this phenomenon. There's something called net zero emissions, which means that your activities remove as much greenhouse gas from the atmosphere as they produce. This is not the same as carbon neutrality but is similarly important if we are to be mindful of our activities and their effects on the climate.

**The term "carbon neutrality" has been popular recently, but it has been a while since it was coined. "Carbon neutral" was Oxford's word of the year in 2006, and it's more relevant now than ever because of the ongoing climate change crisis.**

You might be thinking, since it's possible to be carbon neutral, can we go even beyond that? Absolutely. We can ensure the absorption of more carbon dioxide than we emit, and this concept also has its own name and is generally referred to as "carbon negativity" or "climate positivity".

Aside from planting trees or creating carbon sinks to increase carbon absorption, another way to reach carbon neutrality is to lower your carbon emissions. As individuals, we can do so by engaging in sustainable practices. Limiting the use of fossil fuels in our everyday life works wonders, which means avoiding vehicles that have high fuel consumption. Shared transport or public transport, or vehicles like bicycles and *rickshaws*, are great for the environment, although not very realistic for cities like Dhaka that aren't exactly walkable.

The term "carbon neutrality" has been popular recently, but it has been a while since it was coined. "Carbon neutral" was Oxford's word of the year in 2006, and it's more relevant now than ever because of the ongoing climate change crisis. There has been a worldwide push for an increase in sustainable practices and reducing carbon footprints for individuals and corporations alike, and carbon neutrality is the end goal for such endeavours.

The concept of carbon neutrality is an important one that we shouldn't only be familiar with but also try to work towards collectively in order to mitigate climate change and preserve the environment.

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PHOTO: **UNSPLASH**

# The unnerving reality of school and college students living in hostels

**AYAAN SHAMS SIDDIQUEE**

High school can be a rollercoaster. But if there's one thing that most of us can expect to remain constant during this transitional period, it is the comfort of our homes. Don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that our homes come without their fair share of ups and downs. However, we often tend to take the warmth and comfort of our homes for granted. I know that I did.

But not everyone is as lucky. Many young students are forced to experience the ordeal of living away from home before even reaching adulthood. What this entails is a myriad of poor living conditions, dreadful food arrangements, and more mental ailments than one can keep track of.

"I can't tell you how many nights I woke up crying because I missed my home, my family, and my cats," says Nusrat*, a second-year university student, recalling the time when she lived in the Lalmatia Mohila College Hostel. "I could not physically bring myself to return to the hostel after a holiday because of how paralysing it always felt there."

Every person I talked to had something overwhelmingly negative to share about their experience in hostels. A common complaint was that of the food arrangement. A combination of subpar cooking and mismanagement in food portions meant that many students skipped meals on a near-daily basis.

"The breakfast items, like the vegetables or *rutis*, were a few days old most of the time with a slightly weird smell and texture," says Kazi Afnan Wafa, who boarded in an all-female hostel in Dhanmondi throughout her A level years.

Rudra Rohit, a student of the HSC 2023 batch who lived in St. Joseph Students' Home for about seven months during his college years, had a plethora of negative things to say about the food situation, particularly when the administrative body changed.

"There were many days when I was unable to have lunch as they ran out of rice or curries because of terrible management," he explains. "The quality of food also dropped significantly. The new administration clearly never ate the same meals that they forced the students to have. This entire fiasco led to my weight decreasing by almost 10 kilograms. You don't really realise how much food matters to your mental health until you're stuck swallowing whatever's dumped on your plate."

In addition to mismanagement in the food department, the very environment of the hostels also takes its toll on people.

"You're never really alone," says Hasnat*, a student resident of a reputed college in Mirpur. "At first, the idea of being surrounded by friends all the time feels exciting. But that feeling quickly fades, and you're left feeling utterly exhausted. You're surrounded by people all the time in your room, in the bathroom line, in the study hall. Silence becomes something you start craving."

The lack of privacy that came with overcrowding was also a source of immense frustration for many. As Rudra puts it, "The new administration, at the time, enforced a rule to always keep our doors wide open. From then onwards, we were constantly peeped on by the staff members, which was beyond uncomfortable. We couldn't sleep or have fun without feeling like someone was looking over our shoulders."

Loneliness, ironically, was another recurring theme among the students I spoke with. Despite being surrounded by loads of people, most felt emotionally isolated.

"The truth is that everyone's fighting their own battles by themselves. No one's exactly keen on listening to your venting when they were already struggling to stay afloat themselves," Wafa says.

This emotional vacuum is perhaps what makes hostel life even more difficult for so many teenagers. The lack of emotional support, compounded by poor facilities, creates a space that feels more like a holding facility than a second home.

Wafa recalls some of these poor facilities, comparing her living quarters to "a coffin". She laments, "Everything about it was awful. The entire space was too crowded, so I always hid in my room. And the washroom was nothing short of a health hazard, shared by a dozen or more people."

For Hasnat, it is the rooms themselves that are, more often than not, unbearable. "The fans in our room barely work," he shares. "During summer, living with so many people in one room with a faulty fan felt like being baked inside an oven. I'd sweat through my mattress at night and show up to class in the morning like nothing happened."

Another problem that haunts student residents is the absurd rules enforced by the hostel authorities. One such rule is strict, invasive curfews.

"The curfew situation was very problematic for us," shares Nusrat. "We were only allowed to go out from 2 PM to 6 PM. This made it impossible to attend coaching classes or tutor students in the evening."

Rudra recalls an even more frustrating restriction. "One of the first things the new authority did was ban smartphones," he says. "That meant no online classes, no digital resources — nothing. When we complained, they said they'd survived student life without them, so we could too."

He continues, "No one was willing to oppose them directly as they threatened to expel us from the hostel and college altogether if we didn't adhere to their outlandish rules. So, in order to circumvent this, most of us kept our phones in hiding spots like our luggage. We would bring them out after lights out and pull all-nighters in order to do online classes. It was exhausting since I'd stay up all night studying and still have to lug myself to morning classes right after."

The idea of independence that hostels are often marketed with rarely matches reality. For most, it's less about freedom and more about endurance and learning to live without comfort and familiarity.

"You learn to tough it out," Hasnat says. "You learn how to take care of yourself, how to handle people, how to be patient. Hostel life gives you survival instincts you didn't know you'd need."

Shahnaz Akhtar Moni, former supervisor at a girls' hostel in Dhanmondi, admits that these hardships are more common than they should be. "These young boys and girls are separated from their family for the first time, which clouds their hostel experience with an air of anxiety and desolation," she regrets.

But she also believes that it is possible to eliminate some of these pitfalls if the hostel authorities step in to help the young residents feel comfortable. She says, "Something that I used to do, and also encourage other administrative figures to try, is to spend time with the students and have meals together so that it feels like one big family. The authorities also have to make the residents' complaints and feedback feel heard. By doing so, we can equip them with a sense of ownership over the place that they will inevitably call home for a few years."

It's tempting to romanticise such hardships and claim that they prepare students for their turbulent futures. But the truth is that, at its worst, hostel life exposes how little we prioritise the well-being of students forced to live and grow away from home. While some positives may exist, it is primarily a blur of exhaustion, grit, and counting the days until one can return home.

**Names have been changed upon request for privacy.*

*Ayaan immerses himself in dinosaur comics and poorly-written manga. Recommend your least favourite reads at ayaan.shams@gmail.com*

ILLUSTRATION: **AZRA HUMAYRA**

# Navigating US undergraduate admissions

# WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR

**ZARA ZUBAYER**

Before you start envisioning yourself heartily laughing with your group of very intentionally diverse friends on the freshly cut American grass on a poster-like university campus, I want you to hold your horses for a minute. Unfortunately, unlike Miley Cyrus, it's not that easy to hop off a plane at LAX with just your dreams and a cardigan. If you're an international student, there is a series of steps and obstacles to navigate before you step into the land of star-spangled success.

**The application costs**

A heads-up I wished someone had given me while waving a big yellow caution sign is that the decision to apply is expensive in itself; nearly every step is an investment for an unpredictable outcome.

Your journey to apply begins by taking the SAT (unless you're going for test-optional), which has a USD 68 base fee and an international fee of USD 43, adding up to USD 111 per exam. Moreover, some universities require an English proficiency test, which increases the cost.

Most importantly, you must note the application fee of each of your chosen universities. The majority of students consider numerous options without realising that they need a bag of cash just to knock on their doors. Most universities in the United States have application fees ranging from approximately USD 50 to USD 90 for international applicants. Therefore, if you're applying to five or six colleges, remember to keep funds aside just to submit your applications. Information regarding the amount of application fees is usually stated in the Common App.

**Gap years can affect undergraduate scholarships**

The discovery of this rare piece of information made me feel like someone had crushed my dreams with one of the hydraulic presses I see on Instagram reels.

This is a major setback for students relying heavily on scholarships. For instance, universities like the University of Texas (UT) at Dallas and the University of Houston (UH) state that an undergraduate international applicant is automatically considered for scholarships as part of their admission application.

However, the main catch, which even the Common App fails to mention and is buried within the website, states, "Be admitted to UT Dallas or UH as a first-time freshman applicant for the fall semester immediately following high school graduation." To put it simply, if you take a gap year after your high school graduation, you won't qualify for any merit-based scholarship at universities with this policy.

Granted, there remain countless university options that don't have this criterion and will fully evaluate your admission application for scholarships. To be sure, contact each of your chosen universities at their designated emails to confirm your eligibility.

**Know your admission plan**

I wasn't too interested in deciphering US application lingo, but overlooking this can be a huge mistake.

Although the terms might seem foreign at first, it's important to familiarise yourself with the meanings of Early Action, Early Decision, Regular Decision, and Rolling Admissions. They basically indicate when you apply and when you receive decisions. Some scholarships are only available through specific admission plans. For example, the University of Southern California (USC) offers merit-based scholarships only if you apply for Early Action for certain majors. So, you need to keep an eye out to see which admission plan your major follows to maximise your scholarship opportunities.

**Application deadlines and scholarship deadlines are not the same**

If there's anywhere you should be careful not to mess up, it's deadlines. Some US universities may not evaluate your application for a scholarship if you've submitted past their priority scholarship deadlines. For instance, Texas Tech University (TTU) has a strict scholarship deadline of December 1, 2025, for applicants of the Fall 2026 intake. So, students who are waiting for the application deadline of July 29, 2026, you've unfortunately missed your scholarship train.

Applying abroad, in a nutshell, is a rigorous research project that keeps you up for countless nights, drains your pockets, gets your hopes up, and then cruelly slams you back to reality. Stay alert and informed, and periodically remind yourself: somewhere out there, a five-time national olympiad champion, who is a human calculator and genius who likes to build nuclear reactors as an extracurricular, is competing to take your spot.

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*Zara Zubayer is a half-pianist, occasional grandma (she knits), and collector of instruments she never learns. Suggest a new hobby she won't commit to at zarazubayer1@gmail.com*

# Where they all disappear

ILLUSTRATION: **ABIR HOSSAIN**

**At 2:35, Raman finds himself drooling over the metal grille, in search of bird feathers, outside his window frame. On another dozy summer noon, the world around him slows down a little, and the ceiling fan continues to rattle above his head like it would crack down any second.**

**PUNOMI RAHMAN TITIR**

He draws the colour-stained window curtain across the wooden pelmet and allows the heat to brew under layers of his bruised skin.

Birdwatching.

Pairs of hazel-eyed house sparrows perch between narrow ventilation spaces of several high-rise apartments. A few plump grey pigeons coo on satellite dishes under the half-hidden sky. If he is fortunate enough, he might even catch sight of a blackbird or two, preening through its dirt-filled feathers beside a household waste dump. On the days that he's out of luck, he might as well not spot anything at all.

"I have nothing better to do and certainly nowhere better to be," he sighs and turns from the window just in time to hear the sound of fluttering wings land on concrete.

It is Raman's lucky day.

A smile stretches across his sun-chapped face as he tiptoes towards the balcony. Now the flapping has stopped. The bird poses still near the edge of the terrace, its neck slightly crooked to one side. It carefully waddles its way through the door to gulp the solid ball of boiled yolk tied to a cotton string. The moment it tugs, the string loosens, and the gate shuts behind it with a quick thud.

"At last!"

Raman had waited way too long for this moment to unfold. The 26-year-old man rushes down the ladder with the enthusiasm of a ten-year-old child. While the bird desperately seeks a way out, releasing a volley of indignant caws, flapping ceaselessly in fright, and nodding left and right in search of escape, Raman picks up the cage and leans straight into the charcoal black eyes of his feathered rival. He had crafted it himself over the weeks: drilling leftover plywood boards and screwing them together, leaving space for a wide entrance.

It resembled more of a sturdy vegetable crate than a cage. Raman had previously tested it with an old metal birdcage he bought from Katabon, worth 50 taka. However, he finds it easier to deceive them using handmade traps.

"Where are you off to, Raman?"

"Salam, *chacha*. Nowhere, just around the block."

"Ya Allah!" Shohel *chacha* bends slightly as he exclaims, peering into Raman's hands.

"Is that a-a crow?"

Raman nods and extends a polite smile through the corner of his mouth.

"They are extremely smart. This one here, it took me quite a while to get a hold of," he says as he raises the cage above his elbow.

"What on earth are you going to do with this?"

"Oh, I sell these all the time. There is a steady market for all sorts of birds around Katabon. They offer quite hefty prices, too."

He pauses for a moment and then asks without looking at Raman, "This is legal? I have never heard of such peculiar things in my entire life."

"Oh no, it doesn't—"

"The other day, I read somewhere that many of the common birds in Dhaka are disappearing in large numbers. You know, Dhaka used to be the city of crows and pedal-run rickshaws. Now you see neither."

He chuckles loudly and looks back at Raman. "Don't get yourself into any trouble, *baba*. With the way things are these days, you never know."

"Since when do you care about birds, *chacha*?"

Raman picks up on the laughter a little late. The midday heat presses down his throat. He wipes the sweat gathering under his collar with the back of his hand and looks down at the crow, pecking violently at the wooden board. The bird jerks its head up, caws again — louder this time.

Raman shuts his eyes. He isn't listening anymore. The sound of his breath drops, his landlord rambling nonstop, two dogs barking in the background – none of it reaches his ears. All he hears is the weight of his right-hand trembling as the frantic sound of beak against wooden board grows louder and louder, and with even more force than before.

Raman had known his dark, feathered friends ever since he moved into this neighbourhood. There were two of them; he had caught the other a few weeks ago. They used to live together on one of the gigantic old mango trees covering the face of Raman's apartment building. The trees were cut down last month. The branches spread out too far and too wide, restricting the path of the electricity wires – and more importantly – interfering with the landlord's balcony view.

Raman shifts the cage against his side and begins to walk. He likes to abide by his rules, and so, once all the birds disappear, he disappears with them. Onto the next neighbourhood, and in time, the next city. And he does, of course, take all his friends with him. Raman knows very well that this city doesn't find them. Nor anything that strives to live.

# Speaking to children about MENSTRUATION

**TINATH ZAEBA**

Despite being a universal biological process, menstruation, even in 2025, remains stigmatised. Girls are expected to just figure it out when the time comes. Boys are expected not to ask.

One of the biggest reasons so many girls are unprepared is the ongoing silence that surrounds the topic. In many homes, menstruation is something people avoid discussing, considering it inappropriate. Parents assume schools will take care of it. But schools frequently treat menstruation as an afterthought, tucking it into a single chapter in biology books rather than making it a meaningful part of health education. Knowing how to wear a pad, staying hygienic, and handling the emotional ups and downs that come with it, must also be taken into consideration, as this is a regular occurrence.

When the first period arrives, girls are overwhelmed. The common component in every girl's first period story is how they thought they were injured or sick, and were filled with dread because they had no idea what this meant. These early experiences often plant the seeds of discomfort that linger well into adulthood.

As much as adding textbook chapters is commendable in teaching young people about menstruation, we must go beyond that. We have to think about creating a cultural shift where everyone treats menstruation as a natural and essential part of growing up, just like learning about nutrition or mental health.

What we have to understand is that menstruation is also a sign of one's health. A regular cycle can be an indicator that a person's body is functioning properly. On the other hand, irregular periods, intense pain, or other changes can signal health conditions like polycystic ovary syndrome or PCOS or even endometriosis. Without proper education, many of these warning signs are missed or ignored. That is why it's important to start these conversations early, before the first period, before the confusion sets in.

And this education shouldn't be limited to girls. Boys should be part of the conversation, too. Right now, they're often excluded, asked to leave the room during menstrual health discussions, or simply never included at all. This creates a gap in knowledge and empathy. When boys aren't taught about menstruation, they grow up to become men who are uncomfortable with it, or who make insensitive jokes, or who stay quiet when support is needed. But when they are included early on, they learn to understand and respect something that's simply a part of life.

Even now, the majority of people have no real understanding of what a healthy menstrual cycle actually looks like. It's only recently that platforms like TikTok or educational reels have started breaking down the basics, luteal phases, hormonal shifts, cycle-tracking, etc., in simple, accessible ways. Before this, most of it was just assumptions or myths passed down quietly. These new formats are helping people, like young women, finally learn how their bodies work and helping men understand menstruation symptoms. But the fact that social media had to fill this gap says a lot about how much traditional education has failed us in this area.

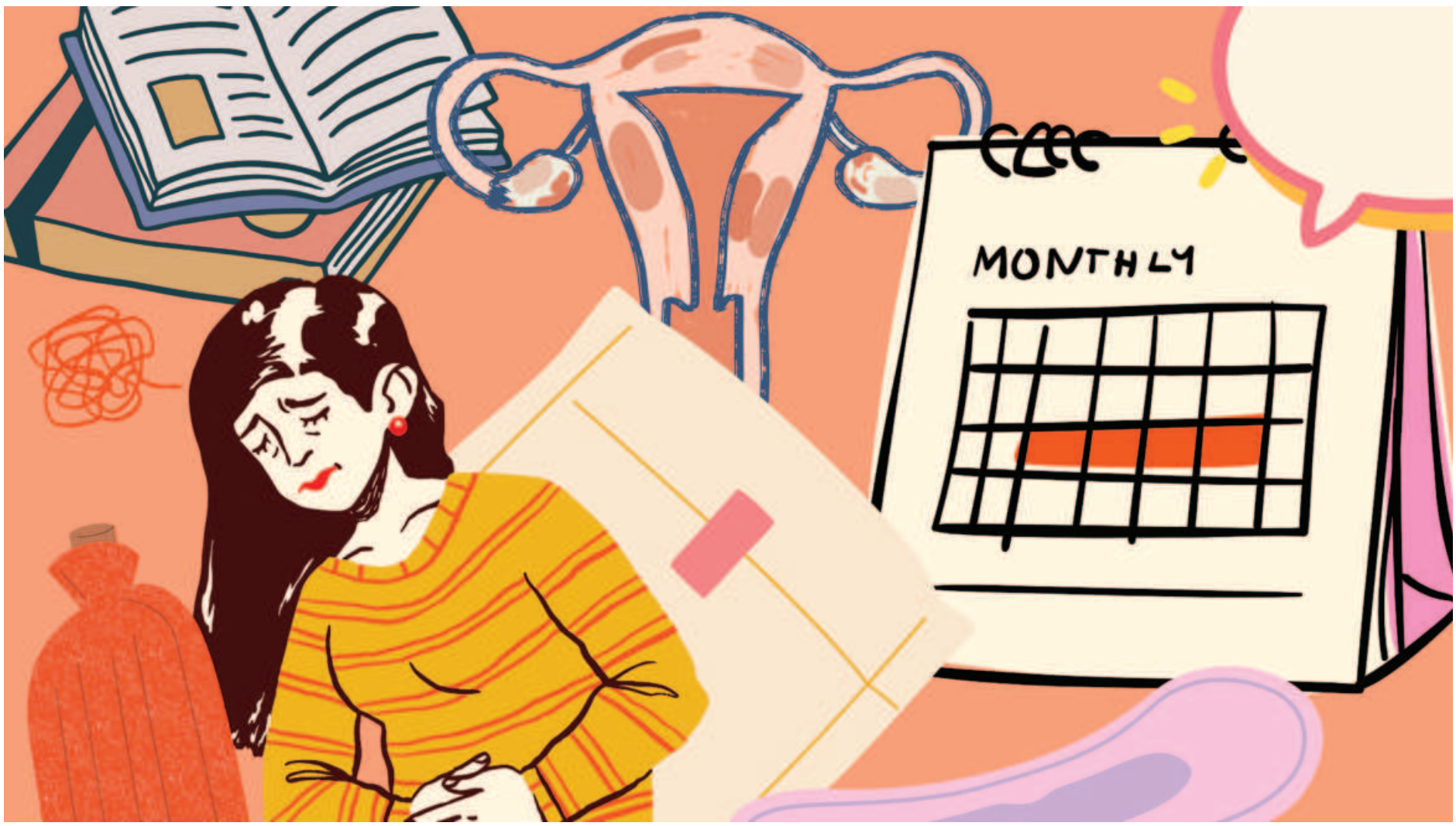
It's important we take conversations seriously because the stigma doesn't stop at the household or the classroom. In many communities, menstruation is still seen as something dirty, impure, or secretive. While advertisements for menstrual products are beginning to change, they rely on coded visuals, like blue liquid instead of blood, and they promote discretion as the goal. These portrayals send a message: menstruation is something to hide.

In some South Asian cultures, even today, menstruating girls are barred from entering kitchens or temples or even participating in normal daily life. Elsewhere, they're discouraged from sports or physical activity. These restrictions subtly tell girls that menstruation makes them less capable.

But when boys and girls alike are educated about menstruation, what it is, why it happens, and how it affects those around them, they grow into more compassionate classmates, friends, partners, and future parents.

Menstruation is not just a "girls' issue"; it's a human issue. Creating shared understanding between boys and girls helps dismantle the taboo and creates space for support, respect, and openness. In a well-educated society, periods are not hidden away but acknowledged by all, without discomfort or shame.

*Tinath Zaeba is an optimistic daydreamer, a cat mom of 5 and a student of Economics at North South University. Get in touch via tinathzaeba25@gmail.com.*

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