

The unnerving reality of school and college students living in hostels

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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.

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