The LUMS Hostel And Its Discontents

By Zainab Shah

When asked to describe what life in the hostel is like, two words would invariably spring up: *a lot*. For a day scholar, things like getting food, falling sick or being alone aren't really problems because, well, you're at home. For a hostelite, these things become problems that you can either fret over today or put off till tomorrow. It's worth mentioning at the outset that this article is written by a day scholar and is, therefore, more of an ethnography.

I told a friend that I'm working on an article about hostelites, which shouldn't be hard because they love complaining. "Well, I'd like to see *you* live in a hot room with [insert roommate name]," was the very calm response. The first couple of interviews were generally quite emotionally charged:
"Oh, you're writing about the hostel? I have bedbugs!" he proceeded to pull up his sleeve to provide evidence.
"A cat got into my room and peed *everywhere*,"
"Our kitchen has a rat,"
"I have to do laundry. I don't want to do laundry."

Money was another big issue. "You spend ninety-five percent of what you get in the first week of the month, and try to make that last five percent last for the remaining four weeks. You basically go from *Baradari* to *Baithak*." Even if you don't blow it all in the first week and try to be "responsible" about it, you still end up spending more than you'd care to admit. A friend asked me for budgeting advice and I gave him a cocky day scholar smile, saying "I just eat a bigger breakfast if I don't want to spend on campus." Instead of punching the grin off my face, he pulled out his notes app where he had every purchase from the last couple of days recorded. Yes, the food here is subsidised but the omelettes, *parathas*, *bhujiyas* and water bottles add up to a pretty decent bill. "I mean, even if I decide not to buy food and cook, I'll still be *buying* ingredients."

Everyone's also walking around snivelling and coughing and doing next to nothing about it because apparently if your mom doesn't nag you to take your medicine, you never do. The "viral" part of sickness is also taken to a whole new level because if one jackass starts sneezing, the entire floor gets sick. On this note, however, the responses had become more cute and mushy. Sickness seems to bring roommates closer together, whereby they're rushing to buy their ailing roommate medicines, hand-feeding them cough syrup, bringing them food, making them *Joshanda* – you get the wholesome picture. This "community" aspect doesn't work the same way for everyone, though. Some people talked about how, in order to reap the benefits of this togetherness, you need to first be close to your roommates or the other people on your floor, because if you're not, being sick or sad can feel even more lonely than it does at home.

Speaking of which, loneliness was another point with divided opinions. Part of community living is the fact that you live in, well, a community and therefore, get very little time to yourself; there's no space that's completely your own. How different people take this seems to depend more on individual personalities than on any objective factors. Some people value their alone time and feel like campus life can sometimes become overstimulating – everywhere you go, there's going to be other people, and the hostelites tend to get together

and make some extravagant plan like getting *lassi* from Old Lahore at 5 AM. So if you want time to yourself, you need to find and make a space in some corner of the campus. Some people will go out, usually under the excuse of studying, and lie on the library sofa and read or walk in circles in the cricket ground. “You find ways to deal with the overstimulation and most people are actually quite understanding if you tell them you just want to be alone.” However, some people actually *prefer* the bustle: “I really *don’t* want to be left alone with my thoughts. I like having constant company at every point of the day; I like that, no matter what time it is, there’s always someone I can call and hang out with, even if it’s the middle of the night.” Again, this is another point that also really depends on the level of connection you’re able to form with your fellow hostelites, because if you’re not particularly close with anyone, then you don’t have the option to choose whether or not you *want* to be alone. To this point, a friend remarked, “Sure, it might be like that in the beginning, but hostel life kind of forces you to be tight with each other. When the day scholars go home, you’re basically left with each other; you’re sitting at khoka or going out – you’re going to end up in some kind of social situation and end up forming some kind of friendship with people you wouldn’t necessarily be close friends with if one or both of you were day scholars.”

On the whole, the prevailing opinion seems to be that, despite the ups and downs of hostel life, the independence is something that you get really used to and start to miss when you go back home. This is something especially noticeable among sophomores, who would feel significantly more homesick in freshman year but after spending three months at home having to suddenly go back to being constantly answerable to their parents about where they’re going, with whom and what time they’ll be back; to secretly smoking in the bathroom; to not having anyone to spontaneously hang out with or talk to face to face at odd hours; to being dragged to family gatherings you can’t say no to, they’ve come to appreciate the hostel much more in their sophomore year. “Sure, you do sometimes miss your family and having home-cooked meals and all of that, but when you do go home, you realise how much you’ve gotten used to your independence, and I think that freedom is worth all of the bedbugs and laundry and kitchen rats. Every hostelite will start off complaining, but if you press them enough, they will have to admit that they do prefer the independence.”

There is, of course, a lot more I could add, but I think I’ll sign off here as your friendly neighbourhood day scholar and leave it up to the reader to decide to what extent they agree with the picture I’ve presented.