



A farmhand is seen scaling a date tree to collect juice, which is a key ingredient for making molasses. As demand for the natural sweetener reaches its peak during the winter season, many seasonal businesses pop up at this time. The picture was taken recently in Bhatibari village under Lalmonirhat sadar upazila. PHOTO: S DILIP ROY

Seasonal business flourishes as demand for date molasses soars

S DILIP ROY

While date molasses is being sold at Tk 160 per kilogramme (kg) in local markets, the same product made by seasonal producers is going for up to Tk 200 per kg from the factory floor, according to traders.

The higher price for date molasses made at seasonal factories comes down to the fact that buyers believe this product is superior to "adulterated" varieties in the market.

As such, the seasonal factories that set up in winter enjoy bustling business to the point that selling solely to retailers earns ample gains.

It takes about 9 kgs of date juice to make a single kilogramme of molasses. To ensure their requirements are met, each seasonal factory has between 100 and 300 date trees.

Each tree yields about 3 to 7 kgs of date juice every day from November to February. With the juice, each factory produces an average of 40 to 200 kgs of date molasses daily.

Supen Chandra Saha, a date molasses dealer in the Kamalkachna area of Rangpur city, said date molasses is being produced at about 100 points across 5 districts, namely Rangpur, Lalmonirhat, Kurigram, Gaibandha and Nilphamari.

The seasonal factories sell the molasses to retailers for a minimum of Tk 145 per kg, ensuring a profit of Tk 5-7.

"But the perception of regular factories adulterating their date molasses is wrong," he added.

According to the sources at the Department of Agricultural Extension



(DAE), there are about 30,000 date trees in the greater Rangpur region with each farmer owning between 15 and 40 of them.

Shawkat Hossain, a seasonal producer of date molasses in Bhatibari village under Lalmonirhat sadar upazila, said he has leased 103 date trees from 7 local farmers.

He will now collect juice from these trees until the end of winter. Having paid Tk 300 and 2 kgs of molasses for each tree, Hossain's factory produces 40 to 45 kgs of the product each day.

"We prepare molasses from date juice in the presence of local people. The date molasses we produce is 100 per cent pure," he added.

Dulal Hossain, another seasonal date molasses producer in the same area, said the juice has to be burned for about 4 hours to prepare molasses. Sometimes

soda is used to clean the molasses, but Dulal opts against it as local buyers prefer a red colour in their molasses.

"We are fulfilling the needs of customers by producing 100 per cent pure date molasses. This year, the demand for the product is huge," he added.

Nur Alam, a seasonal date molasses producer at Naodanga village under Kurigram's Phulbari upazila, said he has 250 date trees under his molasses factory, which produces an average of 110 kgs of molasses daily.

Alam then said local buyers buy the product from him for as much as Tk 200 per kg.

"Many buyers pay in advance to get date molasses from us," he said, adding that the business has received a huge response this year, eliminating the need to sell to wholesalers.

Narayan Chandra Barman, a date

farmer in the same village, said he has 14 trees that were leased out to seasonal molasses makers.

"This pure date molasses is made in makeshift factories right before our eyes. So, we ourselves are using it," Barman added.

Dinesh Chandra, a college teacher in the Adarshpara area of Lalmonirhat town, said he has already bought 7 kgs of "pure" date molasses.

Chandra intends to buy another 10 kgs of the product from seasonal factories.

The demand for date molasses is particularly high during winter for making various sweets and traditional cakes.

"The regular date molasses we buy from the market is adulterated. So, I prefer to buy pure date molasses from seasonal factories even if the price is higher," he added.

Salamat Mia, a businessman from the same area, said he bought 20 kgs of date molasses from seasonal factories and sent it to his sister's house in Dhaka.

In addition, he bought another 5 kgs for personal use.

"We are buying molasses directly from the factories. We think this molasses is pure, the proof of which I got by comparing it with molasses bought from the market," Salamat added.

Abdur Rahim, the agriculture marketing officer in Lalmonirhat, said the greater Rangpur region has developed a business for pure date molasses worth around Tk 30 crore during winter.

A few years ago, only juice sellers would take date trees from farmers on lease, Rahim added.

Digital trends transforming workplace

MAHTAB UDDIN AHMED

A few weeks back, I happened to be in Mumbai, a busy city in India, well known for its heavy traffic.

During my stay, I extensively travelled using Uber. The volume of traffic varied significantly from day to day and when I asked, the Uber driver explained that most offices in the city follow a work-from-home regime, and employees, in general, work from the office mostly on Mondays and Fridays. And hence, traffic delays are normal on the two days. That had me thinking about how the advancement of digital technologies is impacting life in general.

With nearly unlimited cloud storage, the hyper-connected world is moving at an accelerated rate. Most countries today consider connectivity as a basic right like water and electricity.

While it is vital to introduce digital technologies to workplaces, it is also important to identify the problem areas where they can be implemented. Let's look at some of the recent digital trends which will impact workplaces soon.

ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE

Artificial Intelligence is being widely used. Chatbots are being used at call centres to reduce/replace human interactions. This is already in use in Bangladesh albeit with less sophistication.

Many developed global companies have stopped providing human-operated call centre services. AI-based virtual meeting apps can do wonders, including scheduling meetings based on calendars and preferences, proposing a range of times by email, negotiating with the other side, and sending invitations among others.

The return on investments in AI is very high. Research indicates while an individual takes 17 minutes to schedule a meeting, a virtual assistant can do a lot more charging only \$100 per month.

INSIGHT AND MACHINE LEARNING
Sensors or embedded devices are becoming a global necessity in the enterprise, generating a vast measure of data that, if not managed well, can easily become a concern. In such a situation, harness data in context to understand location, activities, environment, emotion etc. Commonly used technology includes an occupancy sensor, smart parking and an employee engagement app. The aggregation of information through machine learning could be extremely useful.

AUGMENTED REALITY

Augmented reality allows a whole range of user support, allowing experts to guide customers through the process of repairing and fixing a problem via a remote view. It won't be long before it will be extended to a larger group, enabling groups of users to access augmented information with the touch of a finger. Groups will be able to simultaneously edit documents on a virtual whiteboard. Meetings will include real-time summaries of actions and decisions.

CYBER SECURITY

Cyber security and data management are so important that their absence can bring productivity to a halt. As we digitally share confidential information, it is imperative that security protocols are installed in every system. APIs are an integral part of the digital workplace. Virtually anything we do daily is done through countless interconnected websites and apps. The process of connecting apps, devices, webs and databases is done through APIs.

The traditional landscape of the business world is continuously transforming, along with the role and importance of technology. Today's tech innovations aim to make the workplace more efficient and smarter for everyone. As such, business leaders need to pay close attention to the latest innovations in tech and leverage technology to realise their business objectives.

APPLICATION PROGRAMMING INTERFACE

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The author is a telecom and management expert.

Banglalink rolls out eSIM

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

Banglalink, a mobile network operator in Bangladesh, yesterday launched its eSIM product to further simplify its customers' digital lifestyles.

Embedded SIM, or eSIM, is a SIM card that can be electronically programmed into a mobile phone without the need for manual insertion. It works just like a regular SIM but does not require a physical card and only works on devices with pre-installed eSIM support.

eSIMs are embedded in mobile devices, allowing them to connect with the customer's operator of choice without having to purchase a physical SIM card.

The launching ceremony was held at the mobile network operator's head office in Dhaka.

Upanga Dutta, chief commercial officer of Banglalink, Taimur Rahman, chief corporate and regulatory affairs officer, and other members of the company's top management were present.

A physical SIM can be used along with an eSIM as well. Banglalink customers with eligible devices can migrate to eSIM by visiting any Banglalink centre in the country.

All the required details on eSIM are available at <https://www.banglalink.net>, according to a statement.

"As a part of our digital operator strategy, we strive to simplify our customers' digital lifestyles with smart solutions," Dutta said.

"eSIM will give them an opportunity to remain connected and use our digital services in a more hassle-free way. The introduction of this service also demonstrates our continuous effort to bring state-of-the-art facilities for ensuring superior customer experience," he added.

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A number of baskets made out of bamboo and used in households, such as for processing and storing grains, put on display for sale at a market in Patuakhali's Kalapara upazila. The bigger ones sell for Tk 300 per piece while the smaller ones Tk 150 and earn the trader around Tk 1,500 a day. The photo was taken recently. PHOTO: SOHRAB HOSSAIN

UCB to issue Tk 1,000cr subordinated bond

STAR BUSINESS REPORT

United Commercial Bank (UCB) will issue a non-convertible, unsecured, fully redeemable subordinated bond worth Tk 1,000 crore.

In a meeting last night, Bangladesh Securities and Exchange Commission approved the bond, which will have floating rate.

The tenure of the bond is seven years and its rate ranges from 6 to 9 per cent.

The face value of each unit of the bond is Tk 1 crore.

The fund would be raised through private placement from financial institutions, insurance companies, institutional investors, corporate, and high net-worth individual investors.

With the bond proceeds, the lender would invest in traditional business and strengthen its tier 2 capital base.

DBH Finance Corporation is the trustee of the bond and it would be listed with the alternative trading boards of Dhaka and Chittagong stock exchanges.