

PHOTO: STAR LIFESTYLE

An ode to Jaishtha

RBR and MANNAN MASHHUR ZARIF

On any given Jaishtha or high summer day, fruit vendors ply the streets of the city selling delicious seasonal fruits. Jaishtha – the second month of the Bangla calendar, is also called “mishthimash” or “madhumash” because of the wide array of fruits available during this time. It is as if the season compensates for the discomfort of the hot and humid climate with the sweetness of *deshi* fruits.

The season's first harvest of mangoes, jaam, jamruls, and litchis have already made their “red carpet” appearances in bazaars, roadside vans, and super shops. The creamy bites of ripe jackfruit, citrusy kagoji lebu or limes, various kinds of melons boasting a triad of flavour like our patenga watermelons and muskmelons or banggi, and other seasonal *deshi* fruits are all making their short seasonal rounds.

Fruit vendors are seen at the turn of every lane, their dexterous hands cutting juicy pineapples. The small pieces, mixed with some rock salt and *kasundi*, make an unmatched treat!

“This is a seasonal business for me,”

says Abdul Mutalib, a vendor seen selling a van full of pineapples in Kakrail. A rickshaw puller by profession, Mutalib has amassed a small amount which he chose to invest in the trade.

“I hope to earn significantly more by selling fruits this summer. Besides, I get to avoid pulling rickshaws in the summer heat,” he says. When asked what he will do when the season is over, he said “I really do not know!” with a smile. “Pull rickshaws maybe.”

Mangoes may be the most craved fruit of the season but taal (toddy palms or ice apples) are not lagging either. The jelly-like flesh of raw taal is scooped out and as one bites onto them, the fruit spritzes out a sugary sap that takes down a few degrees off your body temperature, it seems. Rich in antioxidants, this pulp makes its way to our city kitchens and is used to prepare various desserts.

When fully ripe, raw taal transforms into a fruit with a pulp that has a slight hint of bitterness to its otherwise

sugary, dense edible mash. Dollops of crude, palm sugar jaggery rolled in flour tortillas is the best breakfast of summer mornings! Palm rice flour fritters are as easy to make as banana fritters and can be munched hot from the wok. Coolers like a glass of ice apple sherbet and a spoonful of palm rice pudding are what summer vacations were made of at grandparents' home.

Supriya Das, a resident of Shantinagar, looks forward to the season for a special reason. “We have an age-old ritual of treating our sons-in-law with the most delectable fruits,” says Das.

The traditional Hindu ritual, Jamai Sasthi, ends with an elaborate Bengali feast which will be celebrated on June 8.

“There was a time when I used to buy fruits from the local bazaars and street vendors. Now, everything has become easier due to Facebook and I order directly from the traders of Rajshahi. The fruits get delivered to my

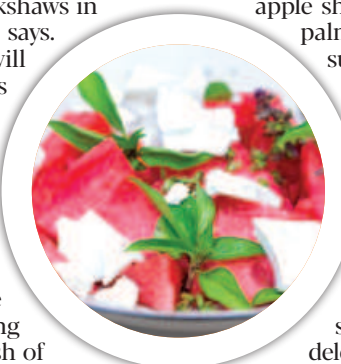
daughter's in-laws in cane baskets. It's a hassle-free arrangement for me,” Das adds.

The mango dealers of Chapainawabganj have adjusted to the needs of the time, and rather than relying on vendors in Dhaka, have set up seasonal, online businesses selling mangoes directly. They make promises of delivering only the best from the harvest.

And, this is just the beginning. Soon makeshift stalls on footpaths will start dealing in mangoes – “chemical free and fresh from the gardens”. Whether they sell the real stuff or is this just another gimmick, one cannot say with certainty.

Mangoes, litchis, jaams – we all have our personal favourites. There was a time when people used to visit their ancestral homes to get a taste of the delectable fruits of the seasons, straight from the trees. People used to bring fruits like mangoes in sacks as they returned to the city.

Those days seem to be gone now. Our lives are now seemingly easier, and experiencing the proverbial “Mamar Bari” is now only a poem found in school textbooks!



CHEQUE FRAUD

Evaly's Rassel, Nasrin get one year in jail

STAFF CORRESPONDENT, Ctg

A Chattogram court yesterday sentenced former CEO of the controversial e-commerce platform Evaly, Mohammad Rassel, and his wife and Evaly co-founder Shamima Nasrin, to one year in jail in a cheque fraud case.

Chattogram Seventh Joint Metropolitan Sessions Court Judge Mohiuddin handed down the verdict in the absence of the accused, said plaintiff lawyer advocate Shahriar Yasir Arafat.

He said the court also fined the couple Tk 1.80 lakh and issued arrest warrants against them as they are absconding.

According to the case statement, Jasim Uddin, a resident of the Panchlaish area of the city, paid Evaly Tk 1.10 lakh in April 2021 for the purchase of a motorcycle.

However, Evaly did not deliver the bike. Later, Evaly gave him a cheque, which was rejected by the bank.

Following that, the victim filed a case against Rassel and his wife with the Chittagong court on October 2, 2021.

On September 16, 2021, Rassel and Shamima were arrested from their Mohammadpur residence in the capital in a case filed over fraud and embezzlement.

Shamima was released on bail in April 2022, and Rassel was released on bail on December 19, 2022.

NHRC demands probe, punishment for rape of woman, her suicide

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) has ordered an investigation into the gang rape and subsequent suicide of a woman in Kurigram following her family's inability to repay a loan.

This directive was given in a press release issued by the NHRC yesterday.

According to a complaint filed by the victim's uncle at Rajibpur Police Station in Kurigram on May 31, the woman and her husband, residents of Collegepara, had taken a Tk 20,000 loan from one Jaynal Abedin a few months ago. As they could not repay the loan, Jaynal and three others raped the woman for two months.

On May 22, the victim, who is the mother of a three-year-old child, told some of her relatives and neighbours and even recorded herself saying, “I was blackmailed, I was gang-raped.”

Two days later, the couple ingested poison together, police said.

On information, locals came to their aid and took them to the hospital. On May 29, the woman died but her husband survived.

Railway off track

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procurement and maintenance of trains were neglected.

Since most of the BR's workshops and loco sheds are very old and lack staff, the regular maintenance and repair jobs take longer than usual, and the standard of work is subpar.

Amid Covid-19 pandemic and a few years prior to that, the BR suspended operations of at least 99 local, commuter and mail trains due to shortage of locomotives, carriages and staff. Very few of the services resumed after the pandemic.

Currently BR is implementing 32 projects of which deadline for 22 have been extended at least once. Some of the other 10 projects are also running behind schedule, BR documents show.

Deadlines for some projects were extended by over 10 years.

MONEY PIT

Between 2008-09 and 2023-24 fiscal years, the BR received Tk 1,22,542 crore under the Annual Development Plan, according to documents.

As of March this year, the BR spent Tk 87,232 crore, meaning the agency could not utilise 27.81 percent of the allocated money.

The economic life of a locomotive is 20 years, officials said. But 167 (53 percent) of its engines are over 20 years old.

Out of 2,017 carriages, 982 are over 20 years old and 934 are over 35 years old.

BR's workforce size is roughly half of what is needed to ensure proper service. The agency employs 24,403 people against 47,637 authorised posts, according to BR data from March.

Of the 23,234 vacant posts, 20,666 are for third- and fourth-grade employees.

After years, BR began hiring in third- and fourth-grade positions in 2022, and has recruited 5,342 people so far.

CHRONIC SUFFERING

The prime minister in December 2023 approved new intercity trains between Dhaka and Noakhali, Lalmonirhat and Sylhet.

The BR launched the Dhaka-Lalmonirhat Burimari Express in March, but the Dhaka-Sylhet Tanguar Express and Dhaka-Noakhali Subarnachar Express services have not been started.

The scarcity of locomotives and carriages was there when the plans were made. But the aim was to launch the new trains ahead of the general election because of the demand from local representatives.

The two new train services on the Dhaka-Cox's Bazar route following the inauguration of Chattogram-Cox's Bazar line intensified the scarcity. As a result, the BR could not launch new trains.

Besides, the BR had a plan to introduce three more intercity trains on Dhaka-Cox's Bazar route, but it could not do that due to the shortage of metre-gauge locomotives.

Rather, the railways suspended operations of commuter trains on Chattogram-Cox's Bazar route, which was launched just before the Eid in April, on Thursday due to locomotive and manpower crises.

The BR is expected to open Dhaka to Jashore rail line via Padma Bridge next month.

According to a feasibility study on the project, at least 24 pairs of trains can be operated on the line daily once the entire 169km line is ready. But only five pairs of trains are operating on the partially opened line between Dhaka and Bhanga.

The BR wants to introduce new trains or increase frequency of the trains in the south-western region, and operate more freight trains, particularly from India, to effectively utilise the line.

But BR will face a manpower and carriage crisis, officials said.

LOCOMOTIVE CRISIS PERSISTENT

In the 1969-70 fiscal year, the BR had 486 locomotives. The number came down to 268 in 2019 when 72 percent of the engines were over 20 years old.

The crisis was so serious that BR in April 2019 sought to “hire” or “get as courtesy” 20 locomotives from India.

Between 2019 and 2023, BR added 40 broad-gauge and 30 metre-gauge locomotives under three projects and 30 “little used” Indian broad-gauge ones to its fleet.

But the addition could not give enough respite as BR had to replace many ageing locomotives.

Besides, the authorities have launched around 11 pairs of new intercity trains in the last five years, intensifying the scarcity.

Last year, the BR had to cancel two of its projects – one to buy 70 metre-gauge locomotives and another for overhauling 21 metre-gauge locomotives.

Currently, it has only one project under which 30 metre-gauge locomotives will be procured. The deadline of the project is June 2028, meaning BR may not get those within the next three-four years, an official said.

In the last five years, it collected 350 metre-gauge and 150 broad-gauge carriages under three projects and overhauled 90 carriages, BR document shows.

A project for procuring 200 metre-gauge carriages was cancelled due to finance-related problems.

Despite the addition of around 600 carriages, the crisis is holding back BR from operating more trains, they said.

Currently, it has one project for procuring 200 broad-gauge carriages. The BR on May 19 signed a contract to procure the carriages, and as per the contract, it would get the carriages in between 20 to 36 months.

AUTHORITIES' SAY

Addressing a programme at the Rail Bhaban on May 28, Railways Minister Zillul Hakim said railway service could not be expanded due to shortage of manpower and carriages.

When this correspondent asked why they cannot do this despite receiving a huge allocation, he said, “We are working...We are working fast and cordially.”

The government is going to import 460 carriages soon and existing carriages are being repaired, he added.

The minister said they were building a workshop in Rajbari with a capacity to repair and maintain 2,000 carriages a year.

Recruitment is taking a long time due to many obstacles, and it takes two to three years to complete the procedure, he added.

“We are not sitting idle,” he said.

Siam texted

FROM PAGE 12
Police's NCB wing, Siam was arrested in Nepal.

According to police sources, Kathmandu police want to hand Siam over to Bangladesh police.

A three-member team led by Harun Or Rashid, additional commissioner (DB) of the DMP, went to Nepal on Saturday after learning that Siam was in custody.

However, there is no extradition treaty between Bangladesh and Nepal. Sources said that since Siam used a Bangladeshi passport to enter Nepal, efforts were being made to have him deported.

Meanwhile, a special team of West Bengal CID investigating the murder case filed in Kolkata went to Nepal following Siam's arrest. India has an extradition treaty with Nepal, and the West Bengal police want to take Siam into its custody, said sources.

Investigators said Siam made his journey to Nepal on the instructions of Aktaruzzaman, the absconding alleged mastermind of the murder.

Aktaruzzaman, who is believed to be in the US, also went to Nepal before returning to the US.

Meanwhile, ADC Shahidur Rahman, a member of the Bangladesh police team in Nepal, was transferred yesterday with 11 other ADCs.

He was the supervising officer of the investigation into MP Azim's abduction case.

The Police Headquarters issued a circular in this regard without mentioning any reason for the transfer.

Essentials now luxuries as the poor reel from price shock: CPD

FROM PAGE 1

remained volatile. In April 2023, food inflation was 9 percent and soared to 13 percent in August last year before slipping to 9 percent in February this year. It went up to 10 percent in April.

This means many households in the low-middle-income nation have been struggling to make ends meet since food costs consist of a much higher share in their total consumption basket.

“Daily essentials have now become luxury goods,” said Moazzem.

The CPD analysed the average daily prices of 34 essential food items in Dhaka from January 1, 2019, to May 19, 2024, and found that the price increase ranged between 10 percent and 310 percent.

The price of the fine variety rice has gone up by 17 percent and the medium-sized grain by 15 percent during the five-year period. The price of coarse rice, mostly consumed by the poor, has climbed 30 percent.

“The price of coarse rice has increased more than the varieties consumed by the rich. As a result, businesses are making more profit from the larger segment of consumers,” Moazzem said.

‘I’ve reached worst point of my cursed life’

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Prof Yunus said, “I have nothing to do here. The gods and goddesses determine who should be cursed... We have to appease them through a lot of hard work.”

He did not say whom he meant by gods and goddesses.

Earlier, Judge Syed Arafaat Hossain of the Special Judge's Court-4 of Dhaka set June 12 for issuing an order on charge framing against Prof Yunus and 13 others, said Belal Hossain, bench assistant of the court.

Before the charge-framing hearing yesterday, Prof Yunus, following some of his colleagues, entered the dock, an iron cage-like enclosure for the accused inside the courtroom.

He stayed there for a while and came out and sat on a bench. He was in the courtroom for the entire hearing, which lasted over three hours.

“For the first time, I had to stand in an iron-cage court dock... I'll never forget this... It is a part of this cursed life,” said Prof Yunus.

“Two Nobel prizes – one in my name and another in the name of Grameen Bank – were given. Both

Citing its previous reports, the CPD said the price of three common types of rice sold in the markets of Dhaka has been consistently higher than that of Thai and Vietnamese rice.

Similarly, the price of lentils has gone up by as much as 95 percent since January 2019. Loose flour was up 40 percent and packaged flour witnessed a price increase of 54 percent.

The price of unprocessed flour and processed flour has jumped 60 percent and 45 percent, respectively.

According to the CPD, both unprocessed and processed flour started rising in Dhaka before the outbreak of the Russia-Ukraine war.

“This indicates that there may be other domestic causes behind the increase, which warrants a comprehensive investigation by the Bangladesh Competition Commission.”

Unrefined soybean oil price shot up by 84 percent to Tk 150 per litre while bottled soybean oil increased by 56 percent to Tk 163.

The CPD said prices in Dhaka's markets are higher than that in the world market. In April, the price of soybean oil in the international

market was Tk 105 per litre.

“We don't understand why there is such a big difference in prices, and the inflated prices don't make sense even after considering import duties,” said Moazzem.

“There needs to be a probe to see if there is any involvement of big importers or groups which control many segments of the market.”

The price of palm oil more than doubled between 2019 and May this year.

The CPD also cited the yawning gap in sugar prices.

In Dhaka, sugar is selling at Tk 130 per kg, an increase of 152 percent from Tk 52 five years ago.

In April, the price of sugar in European countries was Tk 39 per kg while it cost Tk 96 in the US and averaged Tk 50 in the global market.

“We can't comprehend how the price of sugar can rise by 152 percent in five years,” said Moazzem.

The price of local and imported onions rose by 164 percent and 167 percent, respectively. Likewise, the price of local garlic shot up by 310 percent, imported garlic by 221 percent, and ginger by 205 percent, according to the analysis.

During yesterday's hearing, ACC Public Prosecutor Mosharraf Hossain Kazol argued for framing charges against the accused, while defence lawyers, including Abdullah-Al-Mamun and Mohammad Shaheenoor Islam, asked the court to discharge the accused.

On April 2, the Metropolitan Senior Special Judge's Court of Dhaka transferred the case to the Special Judge's Court-4 of Dhaka after accepting the charges pressed against the 14.

On May 2, the special judge's court granted them bail.

On February 1, Investigation Officer Gulshan Anwar Prodhan, a deputy director at the ACC, placed the charge sheet before the Metropolitan Senior Special Judge's Court.

The 13 other accused include Grameen Telecom Managing Director Nazmul Islam, directors Ashraful Hassan, Naznin Sultana, Parvin Mahmud, M Shahjahan, and Nurjahan Begum.

On May 30 last year, Gulshan filed the case with the ACC's integrated district office in Dhaka.