



HALDA VALLEY TEA LOUNGE

A hidden gem for TEA LOVERS IN DHAKA

RBR

As I seated myself in the Halda Valley Tea Lounge, seeing the way the welcome drinks were served left me in awe.

A transparent chawan or Asian tea bowl, as it is called, had a brew of the bud and the tea leaf, which were a mild tint of olive green. Alongside it a glass jar of detox water with tangerines and lemons skewers. The small and fancy detailing in serving set the tone of the café.

I was really missing an authentic tea house or lounge in Dhaka, and finally, this aesthetically pleasing place did justice to my imagination of how a tea



The prosperous tea estate, spread around 500 hectares of land amidst the Khagrachhari and Sitakundu hill ranges, offers tea varieties that can be in direct competition with global tea market produce. Their distinctive emerald green and flattened leaves of green tea, finest young green silver hairy buds of white tea, clean chocolate brown with golden hue tea grains of strong black tea, and the famous Red Robe Oolong Tea which has an earthy aroma with floral hints, are a result of hard work to incorporate state-of-the-art technology and unpolluted environments to become one of the best tea estates of Bangladesh.

Recently, the lounge cheered our winter pitha season, with platters of bhapa pitha, chitoti with an assortment of dry fish, mustard, mint chutneys, soft pillow-like patishapta filled with coconut shavings drenched in

molasses, narikel puli, date juice, rice flour flatbreads with duck curry, and the quintessential Bengali winter must-have dessert, the payesh.

"This was done on a trial or experimental basis; I sort of wanted to add a fun variation to our existing menu. The live station of pitha making always brings in an animated charm," says Dr Labiba Yasmin, Director of Operation, Halda Valley Food & Beverage.

The pithas were freshly made after the orders were taken, which kept the taste authentic. They sourced rice flour, and coconuts from the hawk in old Dhaka, but their date juice and molasses were exclusively ordered from Jashore. The only drawback of this festival was that it was not hyped

enough, meaning Dhaka residents were not aware of it.

Halda Valley Tea Lounge has always been low-key when it comes to marketing, but trust me, their weekend breakfast is worth mentioning.

Their chefs are trained in continental and Mughal cuisine. They share a sample tasting with Labiba and she adds her spin to the recipe, if required.

"Our paya, served in the breakfast menu, is a game changer. It is the same recipe I use at home. Our rezala is an authentic Dhakai shahi recipe where I added grated mawa, poppyseed, and almond -- a note I took from my mother. I discouraged the chef's adding of tomato puree, which gives it an Indian twist. So, these small changes and variations have made our weekend breakfast a success," she shared.

All these rich deshi foods, gulped down with cups of chai like shahi, masala, malai or Mughal chai recipes, fill your mind with a kind of fuzzy warmth. They use tea grains sourced only from their garden; thus, these cups boast their favourite Golden Eyebrow Black Tea.

However, their Dragon Well Green Tea makes for their café favourite Moroccan Mint tea. Their Arabian tea menu is a crowd pleaser, especially the Egyptian karkade tea with rose petals. So, at the end of this gruelling week, try a soothing tea.



PHOTO: COURTESY

lounge should look.

Halda Valley Tea is not something that needs an introduction to Dhaka readers, but their almost hidden café, located at YN Center 6/A Rd II3, Dhaka, serving tea that is exclusively plucked from their garden at Narayanhat, Fatikchhari Upazila, Chattogram, is worth a preamble.

NBR revises

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brought back to 5 percent from 15 percent.

However, three to five-star hotels will continue to be subject to a 15 percent VAT rate as they can claim input tax credits.

VAT on the merchandise made by clothing brands has been lowered to 10 percent from 15 percent, while those from non-branded stores will be subject to 7.5 percent VAT. Earlier, VAT on both branded and non-branded outlets was 7.5 percent.

VAT on sweet shops has been reduced to 10 percent, reversing the earlier hike of 15 percent.

Non-AC hotels now face a 10 percent VAT, down from 15 percent, but it's higher than the earlier rate of 7.5 percent.

VAT on automobile workshop services though has been kept at 10 percent despite stakeholders' demands for a reduction to 5 percent.

The recent tax hike sparked an outcry from various quarters, including economists, policy analysts, rights bodies and political parties.

Some stakeholders also staged demonstrations to push for a reversal of the decision.

Talking to this newspaper, SM Nazer Hossain, vice-president of the Consumers Association of Bangladesh, said the interim government deserves appreciation for reducing VAT and SD charges on certain items. "But there are several items closely tied to daily life, and they require reconsideration."

The increased VAT and SD charges have already led to price hikes of essentials such as soap, tissue papers and detergent.

"This situation poses a threat to the livelihood of ordinary people. With Ramadan approaching, this might further ignite competition among sellers to increase prices on several goods. Therefore, these decisions demand urgent revision," he added.

The increase in VAT and SD aligns with the recommendations of the International Monetary Fund as part of a \$4.7 billion loan it approved for Bangladesh in January last year.

The IMF advised the government to rationalise tax exemptions, improve compliance with laws and bring about reforms in tax measures to bolster domestic revenue collection in Bangladesh, which has one of the lowest tax-to-GDP ratios in the world.

The hike in indirect taxes comes as overall revenue collection fell by about 1 percent in the first half of the fiscal year, increasing pressure on the government to borrow from domestic and foreign sources.

The NBR should scrutinise its policies more thoroughly before implementation, said Selim Raihan, executive director of the South Asian Network on Economic Modelling.

"It [the NBR] should refrain from making ad-hoc decisions and focus on increasing revenue coverage in the income tax net," said Raihan, also a professor of economics at Dhaka University.

Cluster system may be proposed for ministries

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Officers appointed to these ministries would rotate and work across these ministries and departments, they added.

Sources in the public administration ministry said a similar cluster system was recommended by the last reform commission in 2000, and a draft policy for activities of the clusters was also prepared in 2013.

However, some influential officials from the admin cadre prevented its implementation, the sources claimed.

"If the cluster system is introduced, admin cadre officers will no longer have the same level of control over various ministries as they have now. This is why the system was not implemented," said an official from the cabinet division.

FEWER MINISTRIES, DIVISIONS

The reform commission is considering a proposal to bring down the number of ministries and divisions to 30. It could be even between 25 and 28, said a source.

If approved, this will bring down the operational cost and help coordination, the source said.

Currently, the government has 55 ministries and divisions. The interim government has already decided to merge two divisions at the home ministry.

Several officials said they believe it could be a good move since some ministries and divisions do not have much workload and could be merged.

Asked about the possible impact of this, public administration expert Firoz Mia told this newspaper, "If experienced politicians and a skilled bureaucracy work together, cutting down the number of ministries would not be a problem."

"However, under the current circumstances, it may disrupt public services."

He added that introducing such changes would first require forming a team of skilled individuals.

PROMOTION TO DS

The reform commission is considering a new promotion policy for the position of deputy secretary -- a 50:50 split between the admin and the other cadres.

Currently, 75 percent of the promotions are made from admin cadre officers and the remaining 25 percent from the other cadres.

This notion elicited a strong reaction from the administration cadre officers. Many of them are lobbying intensely to have the proposal changed.

Sources in the commission said most of the members support a merit-based, 100 percent exam-driven promotion system for the position of deputy secretary. The exams would be open to officers from all cadres.

However, the commission chairman was in favour of keeping 50 percent of the spots for admin cadre officials, the sources said.

APPOINTMENTS OF PS

Officials from the administration cadre are generally appointed as the PS to government high-ups. However, when governments change, they often face setbacks, including delays in promotions or being made officers on special duty (OSD), considered a punishment, said sources.

Last month, a BNP committee on public administration reforms, formed to come up with the party's stance before the commission, proposed appointing non-civil servants as PS to ministers.

The committee submitted the report to the reform commission on December 9.

Ismail Zabiullah, a member of the committee, said many officers who serve as PS to ministers are competent but often get accused of becoming biased towards a party.

"Therefore, we have proposed appointing officers from outside the cadres for these positions," said Ismail, also a former secretary.

The Daily Star contacted the reform commission chief and four other members, but they declined to comment.

FOUR PROVINCES

The commission may propose dividing the country into four administrative provinces. The commission's chairman verbally communicated this proposal to the government, but details could not be known, sources said.

The provinces -- Dhaka, Chattogram, Rajshahi, and Khulna -- could be made out of a broader strategy to ensure decentralisation, the sources said.

The commission members believe the current local government system is not functioning effectively. To bring about fundamental changes to local governance, the provincial system would be good, they said.

CHANGES IN BCS EXAMS

The reform commission is set to suggest significant changes to the BCS exam questions.

According to sources, the commission views that the standard of the questions is not at a satisfactory level. "The standard is at the SSC-level. It has to be upgraded," said an official involved with the commission.

Sources said measures would be taken so that candidates totally relying on guidebooks don't get the coveted jobs.

EMPLOYEES' ASSOCIATION

The commission is thinking whether to allow government employees to form associations. This issue was discussed at one of the commission's meetings, but no decision has been made so far.

Some commission members think the employees can form associations for their welfare only.

However, other members think that the association could evolve into something resembling a CBA (Collective Bargaining Agent).

A decision on the matter will be made soon, said an official.

Draft cyber ordinance

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others, defamation, cyberbullying, "hurting of religious sentiments", and allowed for search and arrests without warrants.

Even though vague wording like "hurting of religious sentiments" was removed from the new draft, it, however, includes a provision criminalising the dissemination of content that incites hatred among religious and ethnic communities.

"Hate speech will be defined as per the Penal Code," said Faiz Ahmad Taiyeb, the policy adviser (ICT Coordination & Reform) of the ICT Division.

The Daily Star obtained data from Centre for Governance Studies' DSA Tracker and found that 44 percent of the cases filed under the DSA for "hurting religious sentiment" were against the religious minorities, particularly the Hindus.

"We wanted to ensure that no political government can abuse this law to target anyone. However, no matter how foolproof a law is, if the political equilibrium and political system do not amend itself, all laws can be abused," said Taiyeb.

The new draft mandates that the government discloses any content it blocks.

"We ensure full transparency. We can only request the tech giants to block

content. We cannot take down content ourselves. If the tech giants block or remove any content, the government must disclose what content was blocked," said Taiyeb.

According to the new draft, once a case is filed and it goes to court, the judge can dispose of the case even before the investigation stage.

The new draft has narrowed the scope for arrests without a warrant only to cases in which critical information infrastructure of the country is under threat.

The latest draft also criminalises sexual harassment online, and specifically mentions blackmail, revenge porn, and targeting of minors. The fines for committing those crimes go up to Tk 20 lakhs, and carries a three-year jail term.

The new law also criminalises online gambling with a jail term of two years and a Tk 20 lakh fine.

The law guarantees access to the internet as a right for every citizen.

The ICT Division secretary said they started drafting the ordinance to prevent a vacuum arising from the repeal of the CSA.

Taiyeb said the ordinance would be turned into an act by the political parties and that they would have the full power to amend and improve the law.

Make right to vote

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The body proposes merging the 2nd and 3rd sections of the constitution to form a new charter on "fundamental rights and liberty".

Chief of the commission Prof Ali Riaz said, "Voting rights are fundamental and cannot be violated under any circumstances. The citizens' voting rights were violated during the last three elections. And there was no remedy because voting rights are not recognised as fundamental."

"If voting is recognised as a fundamental right, then courts will have the authority to compel the authorities concerned to ensure it. Citizens will at least have legal protection through the courts. We hope the courts will function independently, and justice will prevail."

"Voting rights of Bangladeshi citizens have been violated on various occasions, including in the era of military rule."

According to article 102 of the constitution, "The High Court Division on the application of any person aggrieved, may give such directions or orders to any person or authority, including any person performing any function in connection with the affairs of the Republic, as may be appropriate for the enforcement of any of the fundamental rights conferred by Part III of this Constitution."

The last general election in January 2024 was widely criticised as it was not competitive and inclusive. Awami League leaders ran as independents to make the polls appear competitive.

During the 2018 election, opposition parties alleged that ballot boxes were stuffed the night before election day.

In January 2019, Transparency International, Bangladesh, in a study

found that stamping of ballots took place the night before election day in more than one centre in each of the 33 of the 50 surveyed constituencies.

In the 2014 election, 153 lawmakers out of 300 were elected unopposed as most of the opposition, including the BNP, boycotted the election.

Election experts also raise questions about the acceptance of the elections held under dictators in 1979, 1986 and 1988. In the February 1996 election, all the major political parties except the BNP boycotted the election that saw a measly 26.54 percent turnout.

Election expert Abdul Alim says some countries like Germany, Canada and South Africa recognise voting rights as fundamental.

"The option to go to court will empower the voters. The adoption will oblige the Election Commission to hold the election in a free and fair manner," he adds.

EXPANSION OF FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

The reform commission report submitted on January 15 to the Chief Adviser Prof Muhammad Yunus proposes that the right to food, education, healthcare, housing, access to internet and information and others be regarded as fundamental.

Prof Riaz says access to the internet and information is a right in today's world.

"We have observed internet blackouts at various times. Measures were taken to prevent citizens from accessing information. Recognising the right to information has relations with accountability; if I know something, I will ask questions."

ICT turns down Ziaul's petition challenging its jurisdiction

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The International Crimes Tribunal yesterday rejected a petition challenging the tribunal's jurisdiction to hold the trial of Maj Gen Ziaul Ahsan, who is accused of keeping people in secret prisons after abducting them.

Justice Golam Mortuza Majumder, who led the three-member bench, stated that the petition was "not maintainable and premature".

The trial proceedings can go on, according to Mohammad Tajul Islam, chief prosecutor of the tribunal.

Ahsan's lawyer Nazneen Nahar argued that the ordinance, which included enforced disappearance as a crime against humanity, was unconstitutional, and as the government lacked the authority to amend the ICT Act 1973, the amendments were invalid.

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'RMG WORKER KILLING' SC stays HC bail of journo Rupa, Shakil

STAFF CORRESPONDENT

The Supreme Court chamber judge has stayed a High Court order that granted bail to Shakil Ahmed, former head of news at Ekattor Television, and Farzana Rupa, its principal correspondent, in the garment worker Rubel murder case during the uprising.

Justice Md Rezaul Haque, chamber judge of the Appellate Division of the SC, passed the order on Tuesday after a petition was filed by the state challenging the HC bail order.

The judge also sent the state's petition to its full bench for hearing on the matter on February 10, Additional Attorney General Aneek R Haque told The Daily Star yesterday.

The additional attorney general added that the HC order that granted bail to the journalist couple will be stayed until further order of the Appellate Division.

Lawyer Syed Mamun Mahbub appeared as the senior counsel for the accused during hearing.

The journalist couple were arrested at the Hazrat Shahjalal International Airport on August 21 last year while leaving the country.

On January 20, the HC granted them bail in the murder case.

