



PHOTOS: TOUHIDUL ISLAM RUPU

■ OFF CAMPUS ■

The student-led business initiatives of CHITTAGONG UNIVERSITY RAILWAY STATION

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Once only serving as a platform for trains, the Chittagong University (CU) Railway Station now blooms with different kinds of student-led initiatives, making it a multipurpose hub for showcasing creativity, campus entrepreneurship, and a safe haven for students to hang out. Apart from regular days, the place appears most vibrant on weekends and during festivals. From late afternoon till 10 at night, the station bustles with students amidst the thriving small businesses. "It wasn't like this before. The bloom began mainly after Covid-19 in 2022," said Minhajul Islam, a master's student in International Relations at CU and the owner of Mr. Cha. Entering the station's platform, you will come across small stalls and carts, lined up along the side of the platform. Among them sits Sabikun Nahar Labonno, a fourth-year student from the Department

of Geography and Environmental Studies, CU, with her carefully crafted handmade gypsum decor items in front of her. Her exquisite collection consists of a variety of items such as coasters, boxes, and mini showpieces, along with crocheted accessories like hair ties and bag charms. "All my products are completely handmade and designed with a touch of creativity and simplicity," said Labonno. At the time of writing, she mentioned it was only her second day there, and the responses she had been getting were overwhelmingly positive. Just a few steps ahead of Labonno's stall stands Hill Taste Canvas, a food cart featuring various dishes on display. Their usual menu includes *pahari* chicken with bamboo shoot, chicken *laksu*, *binni chaler payesh*, different types of *mungdi* items, chicken and egg items, naga pudding, pickles, and banana chips. "Our stall offers a mix of unique flavours, and as the name

suggests, our focus is on cuisine from indigenous communities," said Tahreem Bin Nasir, the co-owner of the initiative along with Priyanka Chakma, both of whom are current students of the Department of Music in CU. You will also find Renasha Chakma and her two friends, all fourth-year students at the university, sitting with two foldable tables serving dessert items, fashion accessories, and various seafood dishes. "At first, my friend started selling accessories here, spending around Tk 6,000. Seeing her slowly make profits inspired the two of us to start something too, and we are also slowly making profits," said Renasha. Though unlike Renasha, for Tahreem and Priyanka, it all started as a hobby. "We have always loved cooking. My friend is from the Chittagong Hill Tracts (CHT), and we used to cook and share each other's dishes. It was also my childhood dream to open my own restaurant someday. That's how we got the idea of opening a small food stall, and started this cart five months ago," Tahreem expressed. Minhaj, on the other hand, was familiar with food carts in Mohammadpur, Dhaka, and had already sketched the plans in his mind of doing something similar after entering CU. "I maintained good relations with many food cart owners based in Dhaka, and during the Ramadan vacation of 2022, I utilised my free time and learned the necessary skills required to run my tea cafe here. Later, in July 2022, I officially opened my stall," he said.

Tutoring is one of the most common and accessible ways students can make money. When that option becomes inaccessible, students are forced to find creative ways to earn. Thus, when we asked the students about their motivation behind their initiatives, they unanimously mentioned how the 44 km journey to the city for tutoring gigs did not feel practical in terms of time constraints and finances. This was exactly the case for Julfeqar Molla, a third-year student of Islamic History and Culture, who sits in his bookstore at the station. "Tutoring had become hectic for me as it required travelling to the city by train and making frequent trips back and forth. Being a bookworm myself, I found the bookstores here charging exorbitant amounts for books. So, I thought about selling the same books at a lower price so other students can afford them, and that's how I got started here," he said. Despite all the independence and glitz of opening a business here, it, of course, has its own ups and downs. "Since these businesses are mainly student-led, many who start out can't keep it going beyond a month or so, especially if they can't maintain the quality within a reasonable price range. That's not easy for students, and only those who can maintain that balance are the ones who can survive here," shares Minhaj. Renasha shared her own experience, "You need a fridge to store pudding, but there are none in the female halls we live in, nor are we allowed to keep one in our rooms. And this, sometimes, costs me a lot," she said as she lifted the lid off a spoiled batch of pudding that cost her BDT 600 to make. "As a newcomer here, more than anything, I feel that just surviving here can be tough," she admitted. Tahreem reiterated similar concerns as well. For him, the hardest part is keeping customers coming back and

maintaining the same food quality every day. "I am not making food, bearing in mind that my close loved ones will eat it, but rather that paying customers will. So, I always focus on serving with the best quality consistently. And since I am also investing both time and money, I obviously want it to pay off," Tahreem explained. When asked about some major technical problems faced by the shop owners here, Minhaj, along with others, called out on the security issues of the station area, as well as the lack of adequate waste bins. "We have had some theft cases here. In the beginning, we used to carry our stove and gas cylinder back home every day. We now chain them up here inside the cart. It would be better if there were CCTV



cameras and guards around," said Tahreem. Minhaj expressed his concerns regarding the waste issue. "If you look at the rail tracks, you will notice trash and waste materials lying all over. Even though we provide waste bins along our shops, it's not enough. The administration can take numerous steps to resolve the issue. However, we are yet to receive news of any efforts from the perspective of the administration." Talking about the student-led businesses on campus, Prof. Md Anwar Hossain, the Director of Student Counselling and Guidance, expressed the administration's

positive views towards them, but reminded them to be aware of their studies. "Lately, more students are getting interested in running small businesses, and we encourage all to do so. However, they need to make sure that their projects don't come at the cost of their studies," he said. Raising the topic of problems faced by the students, the Director said, "Our entire university area is under CCTV coverage. If students notice any spot that needs extra surveillance, we encourage them to inform us so we can take proper action. As for cleanliness, it is also a top priority for us. We have set up dustbins at multiple points, created a central dumping station, and hired dedicated cleaners, but keeping the campus clean is everyone's responsibility, and we'll take any suggestions from the students on this matter seriously." Most of the students commencing their businesses here don't want their initiative to end up just as a student project. As a handicraft enthusiast and craft maker herself, Labonno aims to promote the realm of handicraft businesses as well as bring joy to people. "I always liked seeing how small handmade items can bring joy to people. I want to expand my business here and online by introducing more creative handmade products, improving my designs, and promoting local handmade art instead of factory-made products," expressed Labonno. "Currently, I am doing it mostly out of passion, and it also helps cover some of my expenses. But yes, in the future, I do have plans to make it bigger and open up a restaurant if all goes well," said Tahreem. Echoing Tahreem, Minhaj also mentioned his plans to grow his brand and expand through outlets if he doesn't move abroad. Even if his aspirations don't pan out, he would still be proud of his beloved initiative. "I think from the 15-16 batch to each one that came after, everyone has built some memories around Mr. Cha. They hung out here, celebrated birthdays, *addas*, and created their own memories. I hope when students look back on their memories at CU, they'll remember Mr. Cha and all the nostalgia surrounding it. Being able to foster that connection and having my stall be part of such fond memories for so many students feels like the biggest achievement," states Minhaj. On a bright note, the student advisor Prof. Hossain tells us about future plans of constructing a multipurpose building next to the ladies' *jhupri*, where more varied products and other common goods will be made available. "This idea is still in the planning stage, and student-led initiatives may be prioritised in this project, though no formal talks have taken place yet," he stated. In an era of job scarcity and uncertainty for youth over their futures, growing hubs like the CU Railway Station can not only give them a platform to shape their future entrepreneurial endeavours but also motivate others to diverge from the traditional job-oriented career paths and create something of their own. And for that, such spaces deserve more attention and institutional support in helping students grow into lasting examples of what youth-led initiatives can achieve.

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