

REVISITING THE ROOTS

# POTPURRI

SPECIAL ISSUE | VOL. 5 | 2021

## Bengali Sweets

Unbeatable in variety, texture and taste.  
Each sweetmeat has a great story to tell

“ There is only one difference between a long life  
and a good dinner:  
That, in the dinner, the Rosogolla come last! ”

Anonymous

## CHAIRMAN'S NOTE



**Harshavardhan Neotia**  
Chairman, Ambuja Neotia

Indian desserts have an identity of their own. And confections from Bengal are some of the most unique. If the popularity of Bengali sweets, known as *mishti*, such as the famous Rosogolla, Sandesh, and Mishti Doi is anything to go by, it will not take you long to realize that the quintessential Bhadraklok, beyond his love for football and *adda*, certainly has a penchant for all things sweet!

*Mishti* plays an important role in the everyday life of the middle-class Bengali, remaining even now an inseparable part of his cuisine and culture. It is common practice across West Bengal and other parts of India to welcome a guest by offering sweets. And through births, marriages and even deaths, *mishti* plays its variegated role to honour the occasion. In the last quarter of the 19th century, the first recipe book dedicated to sweets, *Mistanna Paak*, was published by Bipradas Mukhopadhyay to high acclaim, featuring recipes of at least twenty-five varieties of the omnipresent Paayesh or Kheer, primarily sweetened with Nolen Gur.

Sugar, on the other hand, has been responsible for the transformation of food cultures through its innovative use in desserts in Western countries like Italy, France, Vienna and finally the United States. This history of desserts tells us about the power and landscape of sweetness. And in this vast panorama, Bengali *mishti* has now become synonymous with several confections prepared from cottage cheese or *chhena*. And with its evolution into the mainstay of the region's confectionary delights, thanks to the arrival of the Portuguese in Bengal who brought *chhena* to our shores, *mishti* from this region has never had to look back in regret. Or in anger!

Here's wishing each of our readers Shubho Nababarsho!

*Harshavardhan Neotia*



# BACKSTAGE

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## PUBLISHED BY

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## (FOR PRIVATE CIRCULATION ONLY)

Potpourri is traditionally a mixture of dried petals and spices often placed in beautiful bowls to perfume a room. When the fragrance spreads, it encompasses, most magically, a medley of emotions. We have given this name our special twist and believe that the pages of Potpurri will bring for our readers interesting and diverse reading material with aplomb.

# EDITOR'S NOTE



**Jayabrato Chatterjee**  
Managing Editor

Desserts have always been the *piece de resistance* of Bengali culinary art. There aren't too many Indians who haven't eaten a Rosogolla and waxed eloquent about its delight. It's simply a magical sweet course that melts in your mouth and leaves you wanting for more. Indeed, Bengalis are born with a sweet tooth. But a peep into history lifts the curtains on European traders and pirates who plundered the riches of Bengal centuries ago but, ironically, brought with them the art of sweet making. Before the advent of the Portuguese, 16th century Bengal was satisfied with simple milk and molasses confectioneries like Dudh-Chirey or milk and flattened rice, Dudh-Laau or milk and gourd, and Monda. Sandesh and Rosogolla that took Bengal by storm happened due to the contribution of *chhena* by the Portuguese.

Bengal's unapologetic sweet tooth is probably a result of once being the producer of the finest sugar in the world, beginning with the prized *gur* that gave it its ancient name, Gauda. In this context, a couplet from a medieval Bengali folk song comes to mind, one that perfectly sums up Bengal's affair with sugar: '*Luchir koley porlo chini, jeno Shyamer koley Soudamini!*' meaning, sugar wrapped in a *luchi* is like brilliant lightning, symbolising Radha nestled in Krishna's lap! How much more amorous can you get with sweets?

Since those early times, Bengal's sweet story has come a long way. From various delicacies made with thickened milk, coconut, sugar, jaggery and combinations of pulses and rice flour, the Great Bengal Confectionery Renaissance was kicked off with *chhena* that proved to be the game-changer. And so our Sandesh, Rosogolla, Pantua and Ledikeni made their dry or syrupy, fried or steamed debut, with confectioners vying with each other to create the most innovative flavours.

Here's to Bengali *mishti* and whispered sweet nothings, no matter if you are seated in the lap of gods or at an ordinary mortal feast!

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jayabrato Chatterjee". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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“ I drop sun-dried amshotto in milk and  
squash a banana into it  
Then I mash sondesh into the mess  
As the sound of slurping echoes in  
the silence  
Even ants return empty-handed, shedding  
tears into my barren platter! ”

*Rabindranath Tagore*

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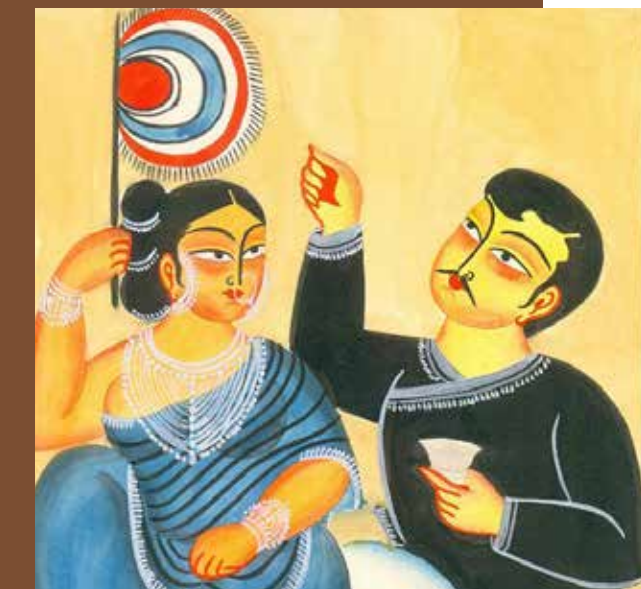




A typical lane in north Kolkata where Nabin Chandra Das perfected the art of making the Rosogolla

# Romantic Rosogolla!

*From the bylanes of Kolkata to the temples of Puri, Rosogolla remains one of India's best-loved culinary inventions. The Bengali Babu and his Bibi stake their claim on it. So do the Odiyas. And the world cannot seem to have enough of the sweet!*

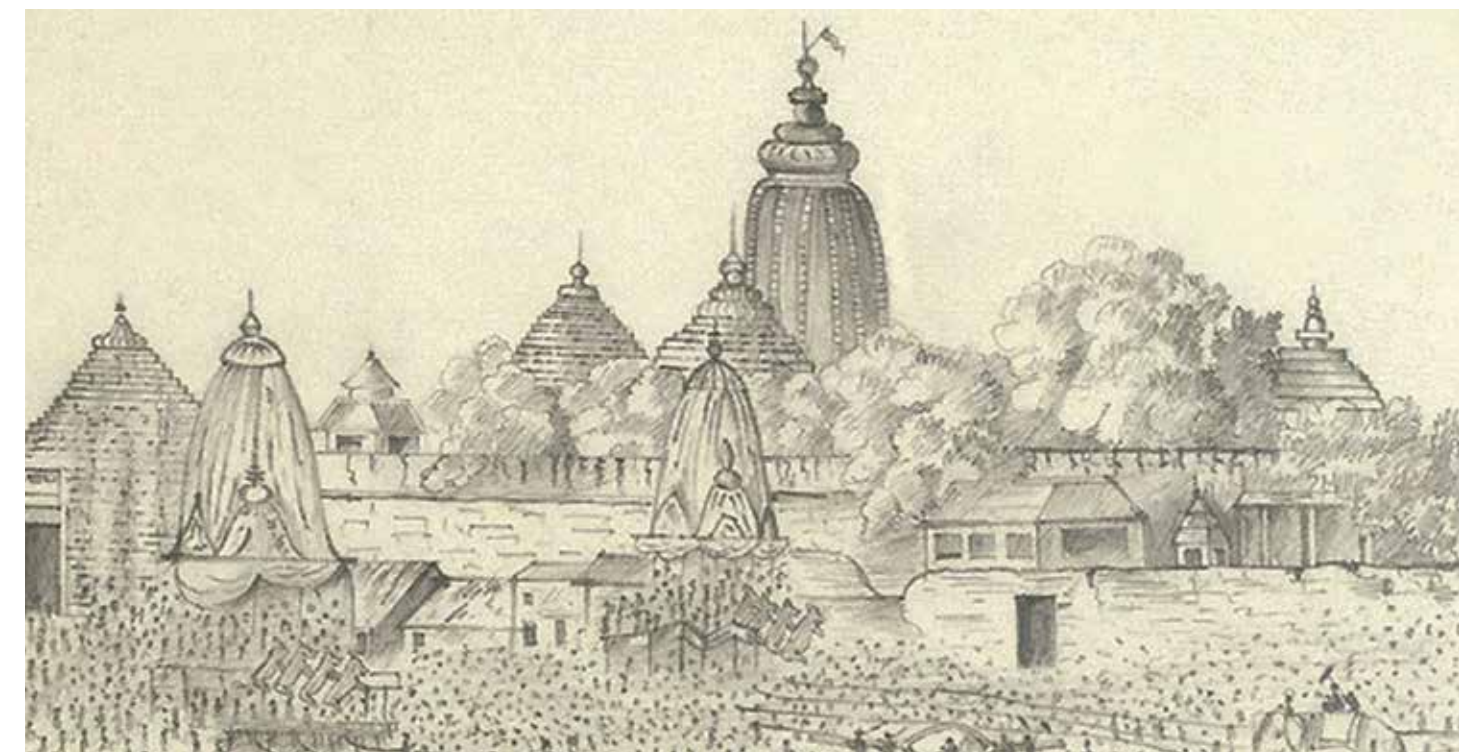


Perhaps, Bengal's most popular sweet, Rosogolla, like the quintessential Bengali Babu, loves controversy! The Battle Of The Cheese Ball was, till recently, embroiled in quite a heated fracas as West Bengal and Odisha crossed swords, claiming it as their special child. Unfortunately, there was no King Solomon to mete out a wise and witty solution till a few years ago.

History reveals some interesting facts about the origins of this celebrated confection. Many Odiyas claim that this 700-year-old sweet dish was part of a ritual in Puri's Jagannath temple. Legend claims that Lord Jagannath himself had offered the sweetmeat to his consort, Lakshmi, to pacify her for not being taken along during the annual Rath Yatra. Known as Khira Mohana due to its almost white appearance

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back in the 11th century, it thus became customary to offer this cottage cheese preparation to Goddess



Known as Khira Mohana, it is customary to offer the cottage cheese preparation to Goddess Mahalakshmi as prasaad at the Jagannath Temple in Puri





Old Chitpur Road where Nobin Chandra Das set up his sweet shop near Jorasanko

Mahalakshmi as *prasaad*, especially on the last day of the ritual chariot ride, also called Niladri Vijay. How the sweet dish winged its way out of the shrine's precincts, given that temples kept their recipes well-guarded, is unknown. But folklore has it that it was one of the priests who began teaching people the art of milk curdling and making the fabled Rosogolla after he saw villagers throwing away excess milk. The Rosogolla thus produced, brownish in colour due to baking, compared well with the white ones prevalent in Kolkata. And thus began the battle to claim hegemony.

West Bengal could hardly have taken Odisha's claim lying down. Loyal Bengali *mishti* connoisseurs from every nook and corner asserted that it was developed by Nobin Chandra Das in 1868 and popularised by several generations of his family. Born and raised in Kolkata at the time of the city's rise to prominence as the capital of East India Company, Nobin Chandra Das's major contribution to Bengali culture and society was his innovative confectionery, which created a completely new sweetmeat for the Bengali palate. Nobin's



Pashupati Bhattacharya would carry Das's Rosogollas whenever he visited Rabindranath

ancestors were sugar merchants of considerable social standing. Originally from the district of Burdwan, they had made Kolkata their home for eight generations. Their house on a horse-shoe bend on the river Hooghly in Sutanuti (currently on Kashi Mitra Ghat Street in Bagbazaar), was well known even a century ago.

By 1846, a year after Nobin Chandra was born, their traditional business ceased to flourish. Nobin Chandra's father died three months before his birth, adding to the woes of his family. By 1864, driven by poverty and with little provision to complete his education, Nobin initially started working for the Indra family, who were confectioners from Shantipur in the Nadia district. Distant relatives of Nobin Chandra's mother, their shop was located on Chitpur Road. However, the engagement turned out to be futile, given that young Nobin was reportedly humiliated by the Indras. So he left the job to start something on his own. Subsequently, at the age of eighteen, along with a close friend, he established a sweet-shop in Jorasanko, and despite initial disapproval by the family, no one could have imagined that history would transform their contempt into one of lasting adulation.

**“ Nobin Chandra Das wanted to invent a sweet that would solely be his creation... In spite of well-wishers advising him to patent his invention, Das then taught the intricacies of the art to various sweetmeat makers because he believed that his formula would become famous only if it was available across the country ”**

Determined that he would not peddle run-of-the-mill confections, Nobin Chandra Das wanted to invent a sweet that would solely be his creation. Das tried to boil cheese balls in sugar syrup, but they would just disintegrate. So he finally resolved the problem by using *reetha* and creating bubbles that lent the much needed sponginess to the *chhena* balls. After sustained effort, he was able to master the art of holding these balls together, and thus was born the fabled Rosogolla.

In spite of well-wishers advising him to patent his invention, Das then taught the intricacies of the art to various sweetmeat makers because he believed that his formula would become famous only if it was available across the country. Das's invention turned out to be a huge success.

Pashupati Bhattacharya, a renowned medical practitioner of Bagbazaar, would carry Das's Rosogollas whenever he visited Rabindranath Tagore at the poet's residence in Jorasanko. However, there came an occasion when the shop had run out of stock. As a result, Pashupati Bhattacharya could do nothing but settle for the



The iconic Nobin Chandra Das who made Bengal's Rosogolla famous



Nobin's son, Krishna Chandra Das, who carried forward his father's legacy



sweet from a nearby store. Tagore felt the difference at once and asked the doctor to bring him Rosogollas only from Das's outlet. That was, perhaps, the confectioner's biggest endorsement!

The legacy was carried forward by Krishna Chandra Das, Nobin's son, who was a versatile enthusiast with a spirit of scientific exploration. He developed an electric loom, a soda fountain machine, did extensive research on homeopathy, and was a connoisseur of eastern and western classical music. Krishna Chandra Das became an iconic figure in the 1930s Kolkata with his original creation the Rosomalaai.

The glory of Bengal's Rosogolla did not remain confined to the Black Town. Even the sahibs were enchanted by its sweet seduction. Fable reveals that William Harold, a famous British cook who was sent to India to help with the war efforts, fell for the Rosogolla lock, stock and barrel. In any event, he was a chef par excellence, and a high ranking officer ultimately promoted him to be his personal cook. One day, this officer ordered William to fetch the recipe of the Rosogolla, a local dish he had tasted and fallen in love with. Back then, written instructions were very few and far between, so William had to physically walk from home to home, knocking on every door, in order to get hold of that recipe. However, in spite of his on-field research, he failed in his pursuit. Every home he visited gave him a different formula and a different technique to work with. Unable to replicate the result, Harold left the country with ten cans of Rosogolla and the hope that he would eventually be able to recreate the dish. Whether he ever succeeded or not remains a hoary mystery even today!

Down the decades, Bengalis have taken immense pride in the spongy sweetmeat. Virtually every dignitary visiting West Bengal – from Fidel Castro to Diego Maradona – was offered this signature sweet during state dinners. And last but not the least, a few years ago West Bengal's most famous *mishti* was provided the Geographical Indicator (GI) tag for 'Banglaar Rosogolla', the state's alleged variant of the syrupy dessert. As of now, both West Bengal and Odisha claim their own GI status for their particular versions and have called for truce.

Indeed, sauce for the geese can sometimes prove to be also ample sauce for the gander! \*



A view of 19th century Kolkata, around the time Rosogolla was invented by Nobin Chandra Das



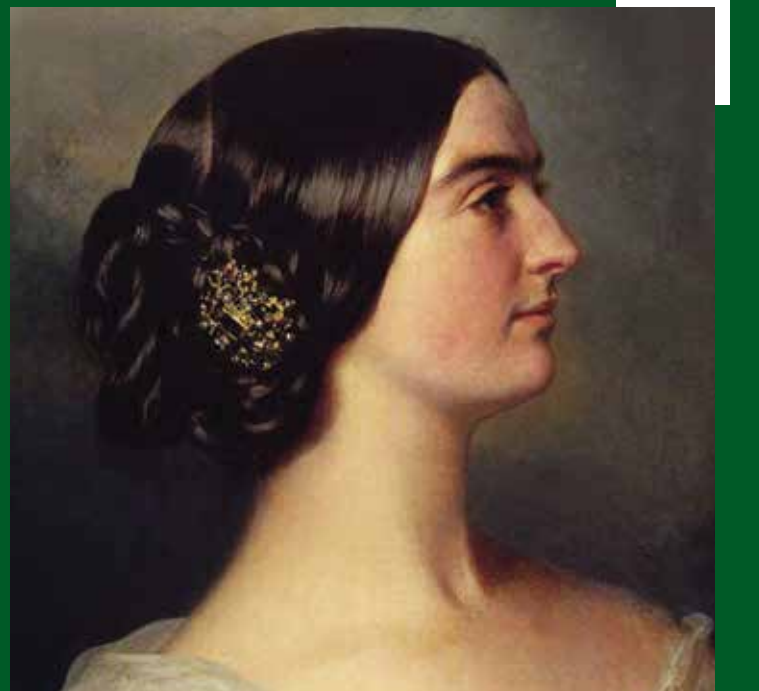


The delicious Lediteni commemorates Bhim Nag's tribute to a powerful Vicereine



# Ledikeni And The Lady

Lady Canning was no wallflower and her stay in India coincided with a precarious time for the imperialists. But she had the gumption to fold her Victorian crinolines into carriages and ride into any storm - be it to a mutiny or the discovery of a delicious sweetmeat that came to be known after her!



It is, indeed, a most unlikely attraction! But the humble Bengali Ledikeni, a popular sweetmeat found even in the most unassuming local *mishtir dokaan*, can boast of a connection with none other than the wife of Charles Canning, Governor-General of India from 1856 to 1862. A Ledikeni is a fried, reddish-brown sweet ball made of cottage cheese or *chhena* and flour, and soaked in sugar syrup. And it continues to remain a hot favourite years after its discovery.

The popular legend elucidates that in 1858, Lady Charlotte Canning, bored of serving cakes and cookies and other dull English confections at her tea parties, asked the Bengali sweet-maker, Bhim Chandra Nag, to prepare a special sweetmeat for her birthday – a confection that would not only take her guests by surprise but also showcase all that was innovative and very Bengali. Bhim Nag rose to the challenge and produced a deep-fried creation, redolent with a touch of cardamom folded into spongy cottage cheese and bathed in thick sugar syrup. And thus, thanks to the twists of time and

tongue, the Ledikeni was born to keep alive the name of a British woman who had fallen in love with India.

Lady Canning enjoyed adventure. And soon the sweetmeat became her favourite dessert, which she would demand on several state occasions and formal banquets. It is believed that a special version of the Ledikeni was prepared by the confectioners of Baharampur in 1857, after the Mutiny, to commemorate the visit by Lord Canning and his wife.

Lady Canning was a woman of many talents and a water-colourist of no mean feat. Once she became lady-in-waiting to Queen Victoria in 1842, she accompanied the Empress on many public and private tours and recorded the places that they visited in a series of accomplished water colours, particularly of Scotland and Osborne on the Isle of Wight. She also instructed Victoria in the art of water colour and with her husband, Charles, travelled around Europe, and eventually accompanied him to India, when he was appointed Governor-General in 1855. Her paintings of India are quite exquisite and on her arrival she wrote back to Victoria, 'Here we are! Really in India! It feels like a dream.... I am quite charmed by it.'

Born Charlotte Stuart in 1817, Lady Canning was the daughter of Sir Charles Stuart de Rothesay. He served as British Ambassador in Paris, where Charlotte and her sister Louisa lived from 1817 to 1830. Moving to the newly built family home Highcliffe Castle, Hampshire, in 1834, Charlotte married Charles Canning in 1835, who became Viscount Canning in 1837. Charlotte was described by the Indian press as 'a beauty, an artist and an eminent botanist.' The Cannings took up residence in Government House, Calcutta, but while her husband worked long hours, Charlotte initially found herself 'isolated to a degree I could never have imagined.' Four months after her arrival, it was noted that her 'health seems to have been seriously affected by the climate of India.'

Charlotte painted continually throughout her extensive travels, documenting remarkable journeys across the country, from her month-long voyage up the Ganges by steamer boat, to official Viceregal marches following the suppression of India's First War of

Independence in 1858. In-between long official parades, Charlotte also entertained in her official capacity as the First Lady. And, of course, the now popular Ledikeni found pride of place on her table. Bhim Chandra Nag was thrilled. One of the most reputed confectioners of Bengal, the shop in Bowbazaar, established by his father Paran Chandra Nag in 1826, still upholds the great legacy he had left behind. Bhim Nag would receive orders from Government House regularly to supply the sweet at short notice. And he never failed to live up to his reputation.

The same year that Bhim Nag invented the Ledikeni, the British silverware company, Cooke and Kelvey, founded by Thomas Cooke and Charles Kelvey, set up business in Kolkata on Old Court House Street, named after the first *dewani* court which was located in that area. The court house was torn down in 1792, and was later replaced by St Andrews Church. The street



Lady Canning spent many leisure hours painting varied scenes that she witnessed in India



All these years later, the Memorial to Lady Canning at Barrackpore stands testimony to a woman who loved India



was lined with several British stores and offices where Lady Canning shopped. And in her casual conversations, spoke about the many delights of the delectable Ledikeni.

Thomas Cooke, who, by then, had started his clock-making business, paid a visit to Bhim Nag's shop. His choice may have been influenced by Bhim Nag's newfound fame as the inventor of a new candy for Lady Canning's birthday, but whatever may have been the cause of Cooke's visit, he was satisfied with what he tasted. By 1858, Bhim Nag's store was more than 30 years old, indicating a steady flow of business and prosperity. However, Cooke was surprised by the fact that such a large store had no clock and decided to gift one to Bhim Nag. There was, however, only one problem. None

of Bhim Nag's workers knew a word of English, and could not decipher the numerals on the clock face. A timepiece would be of no use to them, alas! 'And what if the clock face had numbers in the Bengali script?' asked Thomas Cooke and immediately took to the idea. A sample was sent back to Cooke and Kelvey's factory in England, where at a workshop in London, an innovative employee painted Bengali numerals on a chronometer, fortified with Swiss machinery. The result of a sweet friendship between a Bengali vendor and a

British clock merchant can still be seen at No 5 Bowbazaar Street.

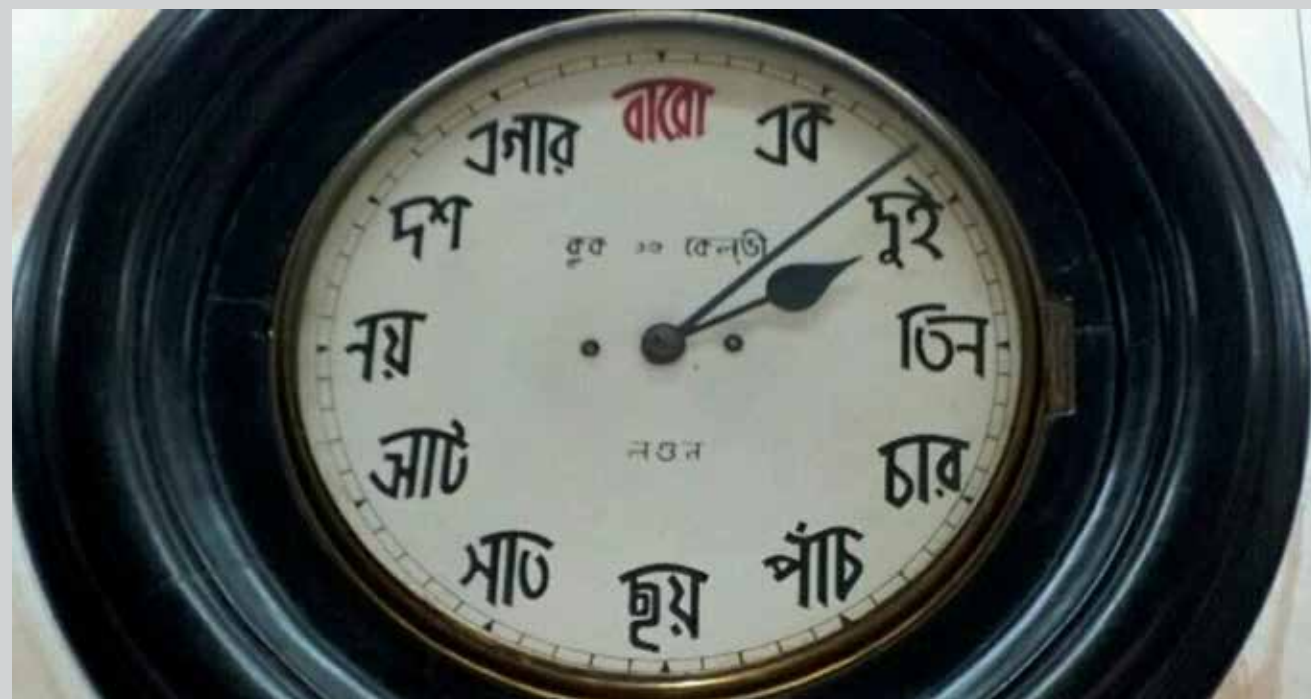
Coming back to Calcutta from her final expedition in November 1861, Charlotte died of Malaria in her

husband's arms on the eve of their return to Britain. She was buried in the grounds of Barrackpore, her grave described by Charles as 'a beautiful spot...looking upon that reach of the grand river which she was so fond of drawing.' An impressive memorial was also constructed in the graveyard of St John's Church in Dalhousie Square.

Since then, Ledikeni has gained immense popularity. No grand feast is considered complete if the sweetmeat is not offered to guests.

Bhim Nag is said to have made a lot of money by selling the sweetmeat, although some have claimed that its popularity grew due more to the name rather than its looks. Its close cousins – the Pantua from Ranaghat, the Langcha from Shaktigarh and the Gulab Jamun from north India – according to snobs were better endowed. But Ledikeni remains a favourite in several Bengali hearts for the unrestricted love it received from a famous memsahib who found India fascinating. \*

**“ None of Bhim Nag's workers knew a word of English, and could not decipher the numerals on the clock face. A timepiece would be of no use to them, alas! ”**



The famous Cooke & Kelvey clock with the dial numbers in Bengali that can still be seen in Bhim Nag's sweet shop in Bowbazaar



Lady Canning lives on in Bhim Nag's outlet in crowded Bowbazaar in north Kolkata



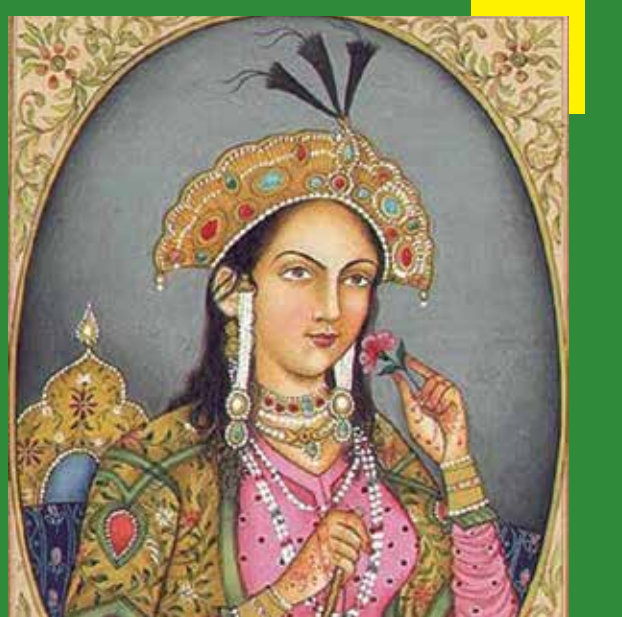


Sher Afghan's mazaar in Burdwan still recalls the apocryphal tale of how Meher-un-Nissa went on to become Nur Jehan once Jehangir's chefs created the Mihidana and Sitabhog for her



# Twin Tantalizers: Mihidana & Sitabhog

*Mihidana and Sitabhog of Burdwan have bred several exciting tales, some historical and some apocryphal, but these twin sweetmeats have never stopped enticing lovers or gone out of fashion at banquets and feasts*



Mihidana is synonymous with its place of origin, Burdwan. Its name is derived from two words, 'mihi' meaning fine, and 'dana', meaning grain. The bright yellow, round-shaped sweet is known the world over. And Mihidana is always linked to Sitabhog, a flavourful dessert akin to white rice or vermicelli mixed with small bits of Nikhuti. Fashioned from cottage cheese, rice flour and sugar, Sitabhog often gives the appearance of a fragrant pulao, which is sweet in taste and harbours its own mystique. Myth and mystery are certainly an integral part of these two sweet dishes.

Nur Jahan, the Mughal Empress, is linked to a tale – perhaps apocryphal – but as appetizing as these twin sweet dishes.

Hardly anyone is aware that Mehr-un-Nissa – Nur Jehan's original name – lived in Burdwan, then known as Badh-e-Diwan, for thirteen years before she was wed to Emperor Jehangir. Born on 31st May, 1577 – the daughter of a Grand Vizier who served under Akbar – Nur Jehan later ruled the vast Mughal Empire from behind the throne, keeping Emperor Jehangir in her iron grip. She had silver coins minted in her name, being perhaps the only Mughal Empress to do so. And she also had a hand in the creation of Mihidana or Daaney-daar, and Sitabhog that was originally known as Shahi Bhog.

In 1594, when Nur Jahan was seventeen years old, she married her first husband Ali Quli Istajlu, also known as Sher Afgan Khan – an adventurous Persian who had been forced to flee his home in Persia. He later joined the Mughal army and as a reward for his loyal service, Akbar arranged Nur Jehan's marriage with him. They had only one child together, a daughter, the beautiful Laadli Begum, born in 1605. While participating in a military campaign in Mewar



Sher Afgan and Qutub-ud-din Koka, just before their deadly duel

under Prince Salim, Ali Quli Istajlu was bestowed the title of Sher Afgan for his bravery.

In 1607, Sher Afgan was killed after it was rumoured that he had refused to obey summons from the Governor of Bengal. The truth was that Jehangir – who was now the Mughal monarch – had fallen irrevocably in love with Meher-un-Nissa. And if a lover could go to any extent to kill his rival, Jehangir was no exception. He commissioned Qutub-ud-din Koka, his foster brother and son of the sister of the Sufi saint, Sheikh Salim Chisti, to bring Sher Afgan to Agra where he would either be beheaded or put into a dungeon, as the Mughal court had charged him with siding with the Afghan rebels. But Sher Afghan refused to surrender and challenged Qutub-ud-din to a duel. They fought a very violent swordfight that resulted in both their deaths. Their white marble graves look identical lying side by side at the *mazaar* of Pir Bahram in Burdwan.

Today, as you enter Burdwan through the Nur Jehan Darwaaza that is now known as Curzon Gate, built over four hundred years ago to welcome the town governor's

**“ In 1607, Sher Afgan was killed after it was rumoured that he had refused to obey summons from the Governor of Bengal. The truth was that Jehangir had fallen in love with his wife ”**

wife, you get the uncanny feeling that you have stepped into a fabled Xanadu of the great Mughal Empire. The thick wooden doors of the *mahals* and *havelis* of several *jagirdars*, *zamindars* and *rajahs* lie strewn around the old Muslim neighbourhoods of this ancient city, offering you a true glimpse of Hindustan during the Mughal era. And how two innocuous *mithaais* decided the fate of a future queen.

After her husband's death, Meher-un-Nissa and her daughter, Laadli Begum, were summoned to Agra by Jahangir to act as ladies-in-waiting to his step-mother, the Dowager empress Begum Ruqaiya Sultan, who had been the late Emperor Akbar's principal wife and the most senior woman in the harem. Initially, Meher-un-Nissa refused to comply. But given the precarious political connections of Sher Afgan before his death, for her own protection she knew

that she would be safer at the Mughal court in Agra. She finally accepted her new post and was brought back in honour – presumably because of her father's position at



To woo Meher-un-Nissa, Jehangir plied her with jewels and even had his shahi chefs create the Mihidana and Sitabhog to melt her heart



the court – but she spurned all advances made by Jehangir, though he lured her with lavish strings of Basra pearls and several other expensive jewellery.

Under Ruqaiya's care, Meher-un-Nissa flourished. In 1611, while shopping with the Dowager Empress, she chanced upon the lovelorn Jehangir at the palace Meena Bazaar during the spring festival of Navroz. In great frustration Jehangir seized Meher-un-Nissa by the hand and asked what would open the doors to her heart. Haughtily, Meher-un-Nissa replied, 'Feed me with drops of gold and the most delicate sweet Biryani your chefs can provide! Then I will let you know.' The royal kitchens, of course, got into a tizzy and the most seasoned *khansaamas* and cooks became hell-bent on producing this unique sweet dish. At last, the fragrance of ghee and delicate saffron wafted in the air as silver salvers laden with what we know today as Mihidana and Sitabhog left for Meher-un-Nissa's quarters. Meher-un-Nissa finally consented and married Jehangir on 25th May, 1681 and was christened Nur Jehan, Light Of The Word. She was the Mughal Emperor's twentieth wife. Laadli would later marry Sharyar, son of Jehangir from one of his other nineteen wives. Noor Jehan died in 1645 and is buried in Lahore, alongside Jahangir's tomb. But her links with Mihidana and Sitabhog continue to linger in the bazaars of Burdwan as a reminder of his great love for Meher-un-Nissa.

Another myth related to the twin sweets, especially Sitabhog, is that Sita, Lord Rama's wife, was very fond of this particular dessert and hence it was named after her. Mihidana and Sitabhog have also found mention in a short story on Pagla Dashu, a series on Dashu's misadventures written for young adults by Sukumar Ray, internationally feted filmmaker Satyajit Ray's father. However, the story about these twin sweetmeats that may have a grain of truth relates to the time when the Maharaja of Burdwan, Vijay Chand Mahtab, invited the then Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon. To honour the state visit, the Maharaja asked his kingdom's renowned sweet-maker, Bhairab Chandra Nag, to prepare a unique sweet dish to impress the Viceroy. Nag raked his brain and tried out different combinations and permutations till he was satisfied, and on 19th August, 1904, when Lord Curzon arrived, he was served Sitabhog and Mihidana with some trepidation. The Mihidana was born almost four decades after the rosogolla but it loosened the stiff, upper-lip of the British official. So floored was he by Nag's invention that he immediately issued a signed certificate to the confectioner. According to Lord Curzon, the sweets were, indeed, wonderful discoveries that he had never tasted before.

Years later, Curzon's sense of epicurean wonder was once more expressed by former Indian Prime Ministers, Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and Lal Bahadur Shastri, when they had



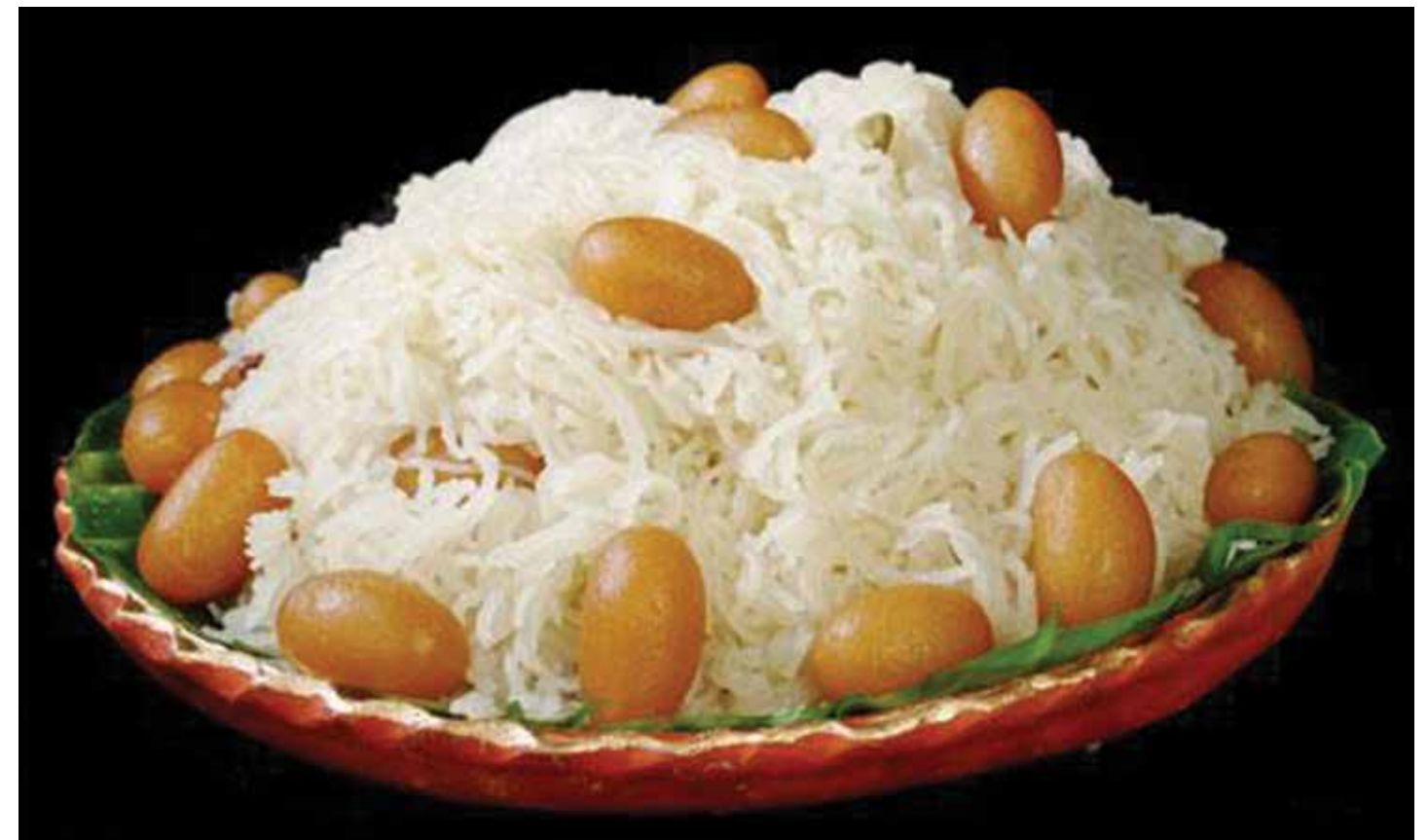
The Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, was floored when he tasted Mihidana in Burdwan

come to Durgapur to attend the Congress Party's national convention. Both the leaders were served the ambrosial sweets and they went into raptures, singing paeans to the wonderful invention. Bengalis are proud of their sweet heritage and, since then, Nag's creations have won millions of hearts. The dessert is made from powdered Kaminibhog, Gobindobhog and Basmati rice, mixed with a small amount of gram flour and saffron for that golden hue. It is then blended with water till the batter becomes smooth. This mix is poured through a brass ladle with tiny holes into a pot of hot ghee and deep-fried. The fine fried small rice-like grains are finally dipped in sugar syrup.

Thus, between the tantrums of a Mughal Empress, eclectic epicurean preferences of a princess from Mithila, the royal palates of a *gora* Viceroy, past Prime Ministers and Sukumar Ray's fictional character, Mihidana and Sitabhog will never have a dull moment with inquisitive food enthusiasts. \*



The fabled Mihidana of Burdwan that has the appearance of tiny gold balls



Sitabhog, another sweetmeat from Burdwan, always accompanies the Mihidana and harbours its own fables and stories





Paatishapta is akin to the French crepe, an essential sweet served in Bengal during Makar Shankaanti



# That Perfect Paatishapta!

Paatishapta is part of the delectable repertoire of confection that is made in most Bengali homes, come the harvest festival of Poush Paarbon, also known as Makar Shankaraanti, that remains one of the few ancient Indian festivals that have been observed according to solar cycles to mark the winter solstice



It was time to end an eternal clash of egos. A time for a father to make peace with his son. And as our ancient mythology points out, on the auspicious day of Makar Shankaraanti, Lord Surya visited his progeny, Lord Shani – considered the ruling god of Capricorn – to finally bury their conflicting relationship and absolve their past bitterness. Shani had been a rebellious youth and Lord Surya – hard as he tried – was unable to harness his revolt. But now time had come to forgive and forget. To begin a new chapter and forge the relationship to newer heights. It is, thus, believed that if any father visits his son on this propitious occasion, all discord gets resolved and ushers in happiness and prosperity in divided families. Therefore, it is time to celebrate with



A Rajasthani miniature featuring Lord Shiva releasing Ganga from his dreadlocks at Bhagirath's request



Another rare painting from the Pahaadi repertoire of Ganga as she descends to earth riding on a Makar or crocodile

homemade *pithé*, coconut balls sweetened with jaggery and, of course, the delectable Paatishapta!

Another legend claims that an evil monster named Sankarasur used to torment and kill people across all corners of the earth without any provocation. On hearing about his torture, Goddess Shankaraanti, an incarnation of Durga, descended from the skies to slay the devil and usher in peace. Therefore, the festival of Shankaraanti is said to commemorate the downfall of Sankarasur, the dreaded monster. What better time than such a momentous occasion to celebrate with sweets and serendipity!

More tales about Makar Shankaraanti point out that on this special day Ma Ganga finally merged into the sea. King Bhagirath, who had released her from Lord Shiva's dreadlocks and brought her down to earth, letting her flow unfettered across the plains from her home in the mighty Himalayas, performed several sacred oblations or *tarpan* with the holy water of the river before it became one with the ocean.

“ Tales about Makar Shankaraanti point out that on this special day Ma Ganga finally merged into the sea. King Bhagirath, had brought her down to earth, letting her flow across the plains ”

Bhagirath was, as fables tell us, the great grandson of King Saagar of the Ikshvaku Dynasty ruling Ayodhya. King Saagar had two queens, Keshani and Sumati, but neither could bear him a child. The monarch performed severe austerities before his wives finally produced progenies. But whereas Keshani gave birth to a bonny boy called Asmajas, Sumati bore 60,000

sons. Saagar, extremely pleased with himself, performed the Ashwamedh Yagna to declare his suzerainty over the neighbouring kingdoms. As custom demanded, the sacrificial horse was let loose and allowed to wander into the neighbouring kingdoms. If the horse was caught, a battle ensued and the outcome decided the winner. The 60,000 sons of Saagar were following the horse when they saw the steed enter a cavern where sage Kapil Muni was meditating. Presuming that Kapil Muni had captured the stallion, they remained

in a dilemma. They did not, of course, kill Kapil Muni as he was a holy man, but they started disturbing his meditations. Annoyed at being distracted, Kapil Muni



It is claimed that anyone passing away on Makar Shankaraanti will never be reborn. Bhisma, mortally wounded on the battlefield of Kurukshetra, held onto life until the unfolding of Uttarayana



with a dreaded curse burnt the 60,000 sons of Saagar in the blinking of an eye. Time passed and many eras later Bhagirath chanced across the bones of his ancestors and performed their *shraddh*. Most miraculously, as he prayed on Makar Shankaraanti, his unfortunate ancestors were liberated from all past spells and attained their seat in heaven.

All these years later, a big fair known as the Ganga Sagar Mela, is organised on this day at the confluence of River Ganges and the Bay of Bengal. Prayers and freshly made sweets from homes are offered by countless devotees at Kapil Muni's temple as part of the rituals – confections fashioned mainly from jaggery and sesame seeds. And of course a variety of *pithé* and the much-applauded Paatishapta.

Several other beliefs also surround this auspicious festival. It is claimed that if anyone passes away on Makar Shankaraanti, they will never be reborn, and thus attain *moksha*. The great soldier, Bhishma, who was mortally wounded on the battlefield of Kurukshetra held onto life until the unfolding of Uttarayana. Once the

sun had entered Makar, the mighty warrior died and his soul was released from the cycle of rebirth.

Makar Shankaraanti or Uttarayana or Maghi or simply Shankaraanti – known in Bengal as Poush Shankaraanti

– has many hues and is dedicated to Lord Surya. As the Sun God enters the zodiac sign of Capricorn, which corresponds with the month of January as per the Gregorian calendar, Makar Shankaraanti remains one of the few ancient Indian festivals that have been observed according to solar cycles to mark the winter solstice. Lord Surya represents knowledge and light and all that is sacred. He dispels darkness and his lineage can be traced in ancient Vedic texts, particularly the Gayatri Mantra, a sacred hymn named in the *Rigveda*.

In West Bengal, Makar Shankaraanti or Poush Paarbon is commemorated

as a harvest festival. The freshly reaped paddy and the date palm syrup in the form of *khejurer gur* and *pataali* are used in the preparation of a variety of traditional sweets made with rice flour, coconut, milk and date palm jaggery.

Gokul Pithé, Maalpua, Kolaar Bora, Dudh Puli and Nolen Gurer Paayesh are staple offerings. But taking the lead in terms of appearance and variety is the omnipresent Paatishapta in every *pithé* platter that delights the gods! Comparable with delicate French crepes, the sweetmeat is stuffed with delectable jaggery and grated coconut filling. At times it is even drizzled with *kheer* or milk thickened with sugar. The demand, pride, and elegance of this delicacy are at its prime in the winter season. Rice from the newest grains and the beckoning smell of the freshly prepared jaggery lure our tongues into frenzy as one witnesses a delectable choreography of varied aromas. Traditionally, with only fine white rice flour soaked in water for the batter, the Paatishapta rolls up effortlessly, embracing the *gur*, coconut and cardamom-flavoured filling. Other versions use semolina as well. But in rice-rich Bengal, rice flour recipes pre-date wheat, a late-comer from the north. This dessert, made with true anticipation by Bengalis every winter, heralds chilly winds and cool nights that cause the date palm syrup to flow, much like maple tree syrup, and the result is fragrant and delightful.

Think of Paatishapta and you will invariably think of all the stories wrapped up in its mouthwatering folds! \*

“ Gokul Pithé, Maalpua, Kolaar Bora, Dudh Puli and Nolen Gurer Paayesh are staple offerings during Makar Shankaraanti. But taking the lead in terms of appearance and variety is the omnipresent Paatishapta in every pithé platter that delights the gods! ”



Kapil Muni's temple at Ganga Sagar where the Ganges merges into the Bay Of Bengal



A mendicant singing hymns at the Ganga Sagar Mela



Thousands of devotees bathe at Ganga Sagar on Makar Shankaraanti, hoping for salvation, before visiting the temple to offer special sweets like Naadu Balls and Paatishapta





Traditionally, boxes of Sandesh are sent out to primarily announce happy occasions like births and weddings all over Bengal



# Sandesh Means Good News!

*'Irate pirates plying the river  
Make all our natives cringe and shiver  
But what brings back miles of happy smiles  
Is Sandesh made from Portuguese cheese!'*

*Old Bengali doggerel*



items like Dugdha-Laklaki, Sar Bhaaja, Sar Pupee and Sandesh' that were mentioned in Krishnadas Kabiraj's *Chaitanya Charitamrita*. According to her, the Dugdha-Laklaki was a predecessor to the present-day *rabri*, but in Bengal the *sar* – a fatty cream skimmed off milk, piled in layers and allowed to rest until firm – was cut into squares and stewed in sweetened milk. Sar Bhaaja is basically the *sar* deep-fried in ghee and dunked in syrup while Sar Pupee or present-day Sar Puria is fried *sar* layered with almonds and *khoja* soaked in sweetened milk. Thus the Sandesh mentioned in *Chaitanya Charitamrita*, Banerji opines, were 'sweetened pellets of *khoja* kheer' and not the crumbly *chhena*-based sweetmeat synonymous today with the confection.

The most enduring theory about Bengal's discovery of *chhena* and its evolution into the mainstay of the region's confectionary traces the origin of cottage cheese to the arrival of the Portuguese in Bandel around 1571, when they were given permission by Akbar, the Mughal emperor, to build a town in Hooghly. The deliberate curdling of milk was till then taboo in orthodox Hindu homes. By that logic, it is only natural that the idea of curdling milk with an acidic substance would be introduced by seafaring foreigners and picked up by native confectioners many years later. When the Portuguese landed in India, we got the first mention of something similar to cottage cheese. And with the introduction of granulated sugar by Tong Atchew of China, Bengali sweets have never looked back or regretted being crafted with *chhena*!

The present form of Sandesh was made famous by three confectioners – Bhola Moira (1775 - 1851), Bhim Nag (1809 -1885) and Girish Chandra Dey & Nakur Chandra Nandy. This iconic shop located in north Kolkata's Ram Dulal Street, famous for its Chocolate, Parijaat and Mousumi Sandesh, sailed across Bengal's borders to Abhishek Bachchan and Aishwarya Rai's wedding reception and became our Chief Minister's gift to former US Foreign Secretary, Hillary Clinton, when she visited Kolkata.

Bhola Moira, born Bholanath Nayak in the village of Guptipara in Hooghly, began working in his father's shop in Bagbazaar as a teenager. The extreme heat of Calcutta summers often turned the



Matinee idol Uttam Kumar as Anthony Firinghee evokes memories of Bhola Moira

*chhena* fetid and to counter this daily wastage, young Bhola would mix it with lumps of molasses that finally resulted in the Makha Sandesh. Guptipara, his hometown, some 80 kilometers from Kolkata, was once a citadel of Vaishnavite culture. Even today, residents observe Raas, Dol and Rath-Yatra, which is Guptipara's most renowned festival. Bhola's heart lay in learning music, having heard religious *kirtans* sung in local temples from his childhood. Initially appearing at soirees as the *dohar* or co-singer, he went on to form his own group and started performing independently in poetical competitions. His greatest face-offs at Kavi-Gaans or Bard's Duels happened with Anthony Firinghee, the Portuguese carpetbagger who had landed on the banks of the Hooghly in early 19th century, settled in Farashdanga, went on to marry Saudamini, a Brahmin widow, and later became an ardent devotee of Goddess Kali. He sang her praises through Agamani songs with such fervour that his piety left audiences mesmerized. The Firinghee Kalibaari in Bowbazaar that he helped to construct still stands in testimony to his unwavering devotion. His repartees with Bhola Moira are now part of legend. Bhola's

**“ Bhola Moira's heart lay in learning music... His greatest face-offs at Kavi-Gaans or Bard's Duels happened with Anthony Firinghee, the Portuguese carpetbagger ”**

impromptu satirical songs composed during musical duels reflect a great deal about contemporary society. Like his music, Bhola Moira's name is still associated with Guptipara's famous Sandesh.

Rani Rashmoni of Jaan Bazaar, who set up the Dakshineswar Kali Temple, is supposed to have ordered eighteen *maunds* of Sandesh from Bhim Nag's outlet on the day the temple was formally inaugurated. According to one of the members of the Bhim Nag family, Rani Rashmoni used to buy sizeable amounts of Sandesh from their shop in Bow Bazaar and carry two packets – one to offer to the Goddess Kali and the other to appease the temperamental priest, Sri Ramakrishna Paramahansa, whom she had appointed as the temple priest. A remarkable woman from her times – who battled patriarchy at every step – she was an inspiration for social reformers and one of the greatest philanthropists that Kolkata has ever seen. Born into poverty to parents from a low cast, Rani Rashmoni took over the reins of her husband's zamindaari when he died suddenly and rose to oppose child marriages and Suttee and submitted a



A view of a zamindaar's living room where musical soirées and bard-battles were hosted to houseful audiences

After the enchanting Rosogolla, Bengal's Sandesh is the most famous sweetmeat known all over the globe. Accompanying epistles carrying glad tidings is invariably a box of Sandesh.

Though a sweet with a similar name is mentioned in medieval Bengali literature, the ingredients of this original dish are constantly under debate, most likely very different from the modern *chhena*-based Sandesh that is now so popular. In her essay '*How the Bengalis discovered chhena and its delightful offspring*' Chitrita Banerji, food historian based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, writes about '*kheer* mixed with sliced mangoes, sweet yoghurt and





The Dakshineswar Temple built by Rani Rashmoni where she offered Sandesh as prasaad to Goddess Kali and Ramakrishna whom she had appointed as the chief priest



Some of the best places where Sandesh is available is in the suburbs of Kolkata on the Hooghly like Chinsurah, Bhadreswar and Chandannagar

draft bill against polygamy to the East India Company. She also challenged the plying of British steamships on the Hooghly as it hampered the livelihood of local fishermen who were up against the wrath of *gora* sailors.

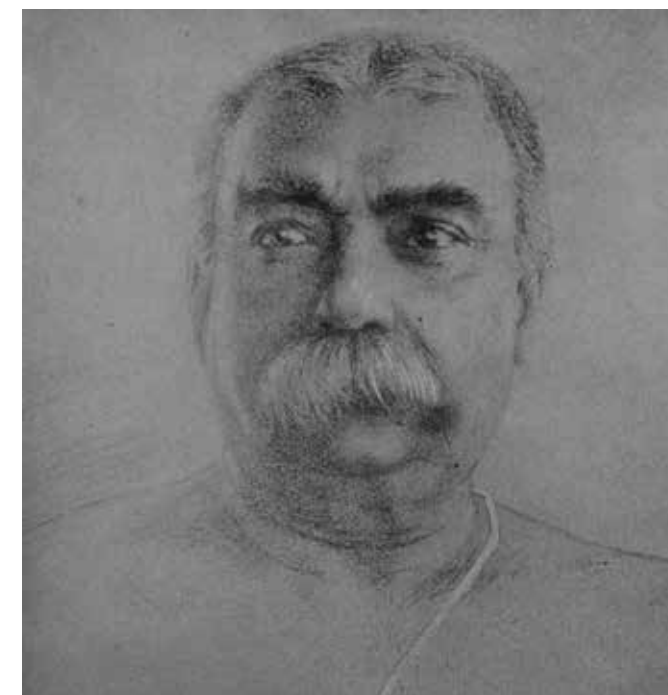
One of the most popular varieties of Sandesh at Bhim Nag's shop, called Ashu Bhog, was named after Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee to honour his weakness for this particular variety. It was his daily routine to halt his horse-driven carriage in front of Bhim Nag's shop on his way to

Calcutta University. Bhim Nag always kept a packet ready for him. And even today, this sweetmeat is only available at this particular venue.

The variety of Sandesh on offer in Bengal is truly overwhelming. The Gupo Sandesh of Guptipara, the Ram Chaaki Sandesh of Sodpur, the Kaanchagolla of Santipur, the Sorer Naaru of Poradaha, the Manohora of Janaai, the Aam Sandesh of Bhuto Moira from Ariadaha, the Taalsaans of Chandannagar, the Jolbhora Sandesh of Bhadreswar and the Kopat Bhanga Korapaak of Madan Moira have a rich history and continue to find unchallenged patronage. However, the least known in the Sandesh catalogue is Beliatore's delicacy, the Mecha Sandesh, which remains an exception. Made from *kheer* and *chhena*, the historical anecdotes related to this sweet are fascinating.

Situated on the banks of the River Shali, Beliatore is 23 km from Durgapur and 21 km from Bankura. Every monsoon, this area hosts the famous Baba Dharmadas Mela. Since ancient times, the usual sweet fare at this *mela* was Gurer Laddu, a confection in great demand as it was made from jaggery and not refined sugar. Unfortunately, the moist monsoon weather was not conducive to preserving the molasses that inevitably melted. To find an effective solution and an alternate delicacy, Mecha Sandesh was created by the forefathers of Bhagwan Das Modak. And it continued to impress many later generations.

Remember always that with its variety and subtle taste and texture, the Sandesh is, indeed, the sweetest harbinger of good thoughts and good tidings! ✨



At Bhim Nag's shop, Ashu Bhog was named after Sir Ashutosh Mukherjee





A bowl of Paayesh in a clay pot is still considered ambrosia for the gods and served at auspicious ceremonies



# Paayesh Tales

*Paayesh or Paayasam, considered manna for the gods during Vedic times, was served at temple feasts by priests and at banquets, as a dessert, by Hindu kings. Over time, it took on its secular avatar and became an everyday food item in several Bengali kitchens. A 'must' on birthdays for youngsters, it is prepared with loving care and fed to special guests with great ceremony*



‘For sheer inventiveness with milk as the primary ingredient, no country on earth can match India,’ stated Harold McGee, the American food historian. True to McGee’s reflections, any Bengali ceremony is incomplete without Paayesh. From offerings to gods and goddesses, birthday parties and even a baby’s first rice eating ceremony, Paayesh has always found a place in the annals of Bengali cuisine. Mostly cooked and consumed in households as a flavoured rice pudding on religious occasions and special observances, Paayesh is essentially considered

pious and hence no *mithai* shop in Bengal sells it commercially. In the last quarter of the 19th century, the first recipe book dedicated to sweets, known as *Mistaanna Paak* by Bipradas Mukherjee, was published to great fanfare and contained around twenty-six varieties of Paayesh recipes.

In fact, Paayesh remains the only dish that has even had an unconventional foreign touch as well, like Blancmange, which many believe borrowed heavily from the recipe of Kheer or Paayesh, as we know it today. Romans used their version as a stomach coolant and often depended on rice pudding as part of a detox diet. The Persians, who introduced Firni – yet another variation of Kheer – in India, were also said to be rather fond of this sweet dish. In fact, they were the first to introduce the use of rose water and dry fruit in the preparation.

Rice puddings have also been around for a very long time in the Middle East. The Sheer Birinj was – according to legend – made by angels on the Seventh Floor of Jannat when the Prophet ascended there to meet Allah. But there are many other kinds of Middle Eastern rice puddings as well, including the Sholleh and the Muhallabia, one variation being the Mughal Phirni



The Sheer Birinj was made by angels in Jannat when the Prophet came to meet Allah

which also uses ground rice to thicken the condensed milk. China too has its own variety of Kheer, made of fruits soaked in honey. Called the ‘Eight Jewel Rice Pudding’, it was a celebratory dish in the Ming Dynasty. In fact, baked rice pudding was said to be a staple during Shakespeare’s time. So how did this oldest and most popular sweet dish originate? And why, in spite of its global presence as early as the medieval times, it is often referred to as an ancient Indian sweet dish?

While it has been proven that Kheer was an integral part of age-old Indian diet – thanks to its mention in the Ayurveda – and the fact that rice arrived in India much before it did in Europe and its neighbours who were introduced to this life-saving kernel courtesy the Arabs and the Spice Route much later, very little is known as to when the first Kheer was prepared or its origin.

However, some food historians point out that the original mention of Kheer, derived from the Sanskrit word *kshirika*, meaning a dish prepared with thickened milk, is found in the 14th century *Padmavat*. It is not the rice pudding as we know

“ China too has its own variety of Kheer, made of fruits soaked in honey. Called the ‘Eight Jewel Rice Pudding’, it was a celebratory dish in the Ming Dynasty ”

it but a sweet preparation of *jowar* and milk. Back then, using millet in puddings was quite common. Coming to the origin of Bengal’s *Chaaler Paayesh*, or Paayesh thickened with rice, it is recommended as part of offerings in different temples. For a region that derived its ancient name – Gauda – from *gur* or jaggery, a fanatical fixation with sweets seems inevitable and long-standing. As early as the 7th century, Chinese emperor Tai-Hung purportedly sent his men to ancient Gauda, with its thriving sugarcane plantations, to learn the art of refining sugar.

On the contrary, medieval Bengali literature, particularly the *Mangal Kavyas* – a vast body of narrative verses written mostly in praise of folk deities and composed by authors from various regions of Bengal over centuries – are speckled with references to contemporaneous Bengali kitchens and studded with delectable descriptions of home-cooked meals that testify to Bengal’s longstanding proclivity

for all things sweet. Mukundaram Chakrabarti’s *Chandi Mangal* is replete with accounts of sweet dishes made



Tapping the date palm tree for syrup that goes into making the delectable gur for flavouring Bengal’s Paayesh



of thickened milk or Kheer, flavoured with nutmeg and cardamom.

Bipradas Pipillai, a 15th century poet who wrote *Manasa Vijay Kavya*, mentions a variety of sweet dishes made of rice, legumes and semolina added to jaggery and milk. Krishnadas Kabiraj's *Chaitanya Charitamrita* – the epic biography of the 15th century religious reformer and founder of Gauda Vaishnavism, Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu – is another fantastic resource of insights on the popular food habits of that period. In fact, Nadia district, where Chaitanya was born – specifically the city of Krishna Nagar – is still famous for its Sar Bhaaja, Sar Puria and the omnipotent Paayesh.

All these years later, few Bengalis can resist a bowl of thick, creamy Chhaal'er Payesh, especially when it is infused with fragrant nolen *gur* or date palm jaggery. Referred to as Paramanna, it is rice cooked in milk, usually with ghee and *gur*. However, Paayesh need not be made of rice alone. From semolina and rice flakes to young bottle gourd, sweet potato and jackfruit seeds, and even *luchi* or deep-fried bread stewed in sweetened milk, the Bengali repertoire of Paayesh reflects the region's almost idiosyncratic culinary imagination.

However, the most engaging story linked with Paayesh remains connected with the Buddha. During the time when he was meditating under the Bodhi tree to attain Nirvana, he was uncaring for threats of Mara, the evil spirit who

claimed that the seat of enlightenment rightfully belonged to him and not to the mortal Siddhartha. While Mara's intimidations raged, in a nearby village called Senani there lived a young, very beautiful girl called Sujata who wanted a husband of equal rank. She had waited unsuccessfully for many years till her well-wishers told her that she must go to a certain banyan tree on the banks of the Neranjara River and pray to the tree-god to make her wish come true.

Sujata had a thousand cows. She fed them with aromatic creepers called Valmee so that their milk remained sweet. With that fresh, fragrant milk Sujata prepared some Paayesh and pouring it into a golden bowl, set off to offer it to the Banyan God and seek his blessings. But, to her utter surprise, she came across a handsome, holy man deep in meditation. Startled, she waited for him to emerge from his trance and then offered him the Paayesh she had prepared. The ascetic, Gautama, blessed her and consumed the sweet dish. Then, having broken his fast of forty days and defeated Mara, he went to bathe in the Neranjara River. Flinging the golden bowl into the waves, he whispered, 'If I am to succeed in becoming a Buddha, let this bowl go upstream; but if not, let it go downstream.' The golden bowl not only went upstream, but all the while floated in the middle of the waves. Sujata fell on her knees and became one of Gautama's first devotees. She had, indeed, witnessed a miracle! ✨



Nadia district, where Chaitanya was born, is still famous for its Sar Bhaaja, Sar Puria and the omnipotent Paayesh



A Bengal School painting of Sujata offering Paayesh to the Buddha that helped him break his forty-day fast







# Ahoy! Mishti Doi

Mention that you are a Bengali and conversations are bound to lead to Rabindra Sangeet, Kolkata and Mishti Doi. There are assumptions galore that with Bengali genes you are a walking encyclopedia of all things mentioned above!



The riverside near Nadia where Mishti Doi is famous

Who can deny the pleasure of having a portion of Mishti Doi after a meal? There are many diverse stories on how this dessert originated but opinion is unanimous on its versatility. There could be a red version or a white one. There could even be a very thick version known as Payadhi or a semi-thick version known as Bhaapa Doi sweetened with jaggery. Whatever the varieties, Mishti Doi from Bengal is an international heart-stealer. And a heart-breaker by turns!

Sweet yogurt originated from Bogra in Bangladesh and remains a very popular dessert throughout that country. Mishti Doi traces its origin to about two hundred years ago, pioneered by the Sherpur-based Bose family and later patronized by Altaf Ali Chowdhury, the then Nawab of

Bogra, who granted a sizable portion of land in the district to the Bose clan where they established their shops and kitchens much before Partition. However, it is in its several Indian *avataars* that Mishti Doi has hit the jackpot.

**“ Nabadwip’s Phaasitala, Mishti Doi’s supposed birthplace, may sound ominous but the inventors, Kali Ghosh and his brother Hari, would secretly feed freedom fighters with the sweet curd before they went to the gallows ”**

There is a legend behind the red curd of Bengal. Nabadwip’s Phaasitala, its supposed birthplace, may sound ominous but the inventors, Kali Ghosh and his brother Hari, would secretly feed freedom fighters with this sweet ambrosia before they were sent to the gallows by the ruthless *gora sarkaar*. They used to boil buffalo milk in a gentle fire, pouring a small amount of water to condense it till it turned reddish in colour. When the milk became sufficiently thick, it would be poured into mud pots and given sufficient time to set.





Several young men were hung to death like Khudiram Bose. But with curd tilaks embracing their brows and Mishti Doi sweetening their lips, they died to liberate India from the British Raj

During those turbulent times, several young men were hung to death like Khudiram Bose who, along with his companion, Prafulla Chaki, had attempted to assassinate a British judge, Magistrate Douglas Kingsford, by throwing bombs on the carriage. But with curd *tilaks* embracing their brows, and Mishti Doi sweetening their young lips and single-minded resolve, they would leave home in the hope that their fight one day would liberate India from the claws of the British Raj.

Kheer Doi and Chaaku Doi were synonymous with the Ghosh brothers. Laborious as the process might have been, it went on to become a huge hit with plebeians, politicians and famous and infamous pashas! You could actually dip a knife through the layers of the Chaaku Doi and it would come out untouched and squeaking clean, so thick and desiccated was the texture! Nabadwip continues to claim that it produces the best Mishti Doi but there are many other areas in Bengal like Malda, Howrah and Hooghly where Mishti Doi is also renowned. Its reputation even stretches to neighbouring states of Tripura, Assam and Odisha.

Mishti Doi is served on every propitious occasion. Lord Krishna was partial to all things made of milk, especially butter and curd. And even as a highly-spirited child, he would steal the stuff from milkmaids and tease them till they succumbed to the call of his enchanted flute. But Mishti Doi also holds huge significance during Durga Puja, especially on the last day of Sindur Khela, as women come in droves to bid a tearful farewell to Ma Durga and feed her with Sandesh and small mud pots of the fabled sweet curd, before bidding her goodbye on her journey to Mount Kailas - her husband Lord Shiva's celestial abode.

Naba Krishna Guin Sweets, located in Bowbazar, boasts a lineage of nearly two hundred years in the business and prepares special items for every Bengali auspicious occasion, be it Monda Mithai for Poila Boishakh, Maalpoa for Jamaai Shashti or Chhenaar Paayesh for Rath Yatra. But the undisputed winner and an all-time favourite remains Mishti Doi. The secret behind their consistent taste and quality is that they keep boiling the milk, adding the right measure of sugar or jaggery, till it reduces to half the weight and turns into a thick creamy liquid. This is then



Bidding goodbye to Ma Durga with Mishti Doi and Sandesh





Bulgaria claims that it discovered sweet curd. The country even has a museum dedicated to different types of yoghurt

cooled and finally allowed to set. No artificial colours or flavours are used in this process.

If you were to ask your grandparents about the best Mishti Doi in the city, the answer would come in a split second - Amrit Sweets, at Fariapukur's Haathi Bagaan in Sovabazaar, of course! That instant connect will always remain the huge nostalgia value of this shop. With a soft, creamy texture, perfect sweetness and melt-in-your-mouth consistency, this shop's Mishti Doi has always remained a favourite with old timers and new.

Do not judge Jadab Chandra Das on College Street by its minuscule size. An uninitiated passer-by would not even notice it if he did not know that some of Bengal's most famous icons like Satyajit Ray, Suchitra Sen and even Kishore Kumar always ordered their Mishti Doi from this tiny outlet.

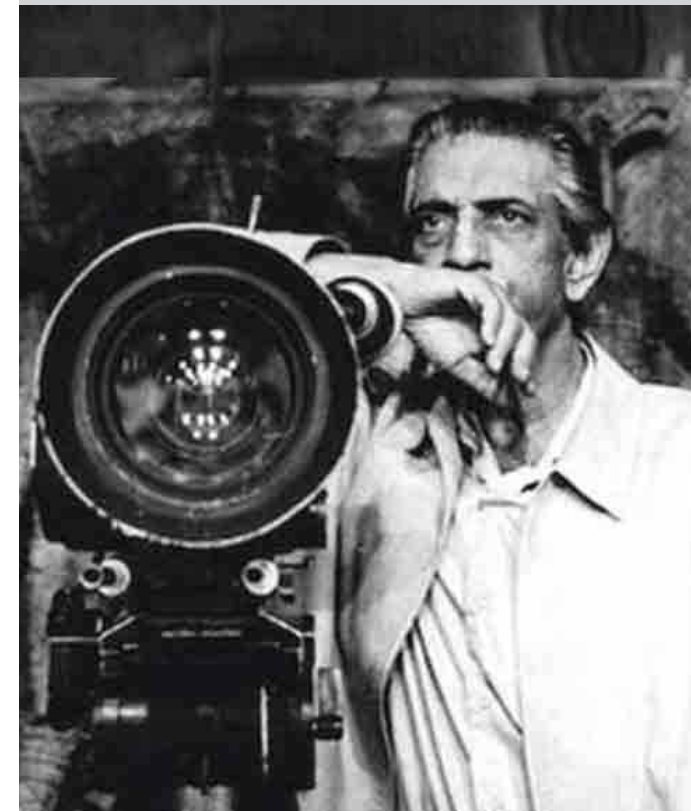
On the other side of these success stories is the folding up of Jalajog – an enterprising range of sweet shops established in the 1930s – whose Payadhi was christened by no less a personality than Rabindranath Tagore. This must have been one of the rare cases when even the Tagore name failed to sell as there was a time when Jalajog presented the best of their fare to

the leading lights of contemporary society and earned glowing certificates in return. The signatories ranged from Netaji to matinee idol Uttam Kumar.

The journey of Mishti Doi has certainly been circuitous. But would you believe that Bengal's favourite sweet curd originated in Bulgaria, as some food historians claim? Preposterous as the claim may sound, they declare that several of Bengal's sweets commenced in some European nation or another and that the yeast that helps to make Mishti Doi is even called *Lactobacillus Bulgaricus* to honour the appellation of the country that taught the world how to make yoghurt. It is believed that almost four thousand years ago Mishti Doi was brought to Bulgaria by the nomadic tribes of Central Asia in bags that were made from animal skin. Such bags were the best to aid in the process of fermentation that the milk needed so that curd could be prepared. Hence Bulgaria was the leading European nation to have introduced curd in Europe. Bulgaria even has a museum dedicated exclusively to the yoghurt. This is probably the only museum in the world that caters to only curds.

Dadiah, a traditional variety of fermented milk popular among people of West Sumatra, Indonesia, and Malaysia is also made by pouring fresh, raw, unheated buffalo milk into a bamboo tube capped with a banana leaf and allowed to ferment at room temperature for two days. Dhau, another variety of yogurt, is prepared by the Newars of Nepal. A milk product made by bacterial fermentation of milk, it is allowed to settle in either clay pots or ceramic cups. Matzoon or Matsoni is a fermented milk product of Armenian origin, distributed in Armenia and Georgia. In Japan, it is called Caspian Sea Yogurt. Nai Lao, a form of yoghurt from Beijing, is a traditional fermented milk drink prepared by heating milk and adding sugar to it. Two types of nuts mixed with raisins and rice wine are also poured into the concoction and thoroughly stirred. Special yogurt barrels are used during production. Quatiq from the Turkic countries, on the other hand, is a fermented milk, sweet in taste and similar in texture to Mishti Doi, that stakes its claim to being the 'Big Brother' of all sweet curds.

So here's to our very own Mishti Doi, a perennial favourite, and to its numerous international cousins staking claim to its bloodline! ✨



Bengal's best known film director, Satyajit Ray, had a soft corner for Mishti Doi





Home-made sweets from villages and mofussil towns of Bengal are rare to find but still hold great charm for diehard confection devotees



# Sweet Nothings

Almost each and every Bengali believes that *mishti* is more than food; it is an emotion deeply rooted in the very essence of their being. Several Bengali sweets are seasonal or remain outside the pale of the usual repertoire



greeting guests, Bengali sweets are always a signature attraction. Time and again, *mishti* has made its appearance in Bengali movies and novels. The iconic film, *Goopy Gyne Bagha Byne* by Satyajit Ray, has an elaborate scene featuring Bengal's Monda Mithaai dropping from the skies in earthen pots, making hungry soldiers rush for the delicacy in a thrilling finale. Very recently, an entire movie on the story of Rosogolla and how it was inadvertently birthed by young Nobin Chandra Das won several hearts. In *Dhanni Meye*, Uttam Kumar can be seen devouring this succulent delicacy, as is Soumitra Chatterjee in *Teen Kanya*, when he comes visiting a home in his village as a prospective groom. And who can forget the village sweet-seller in *Pather Panchali*, with his pots on a bamboo pole balanced over his shoulder, wending his way to sell his wares, followed by delighted children and a dog? Love and revenge sagas, duels fought over a hapless maiden and conjugal bliss celebrated with a plateful of *mishti* are exciting scenes both from the pages of fiction or from the silver screen, played out with great panache. Almost each and every Bengali believes that *mishti* is more than food; it is an emotion deeply rooted in the very essence of their being.

Several Bengali sweets are seasonal or remain outside the confines of the usual repertoire like the popular coconut and sesame Naadu balls. Narkel Naadu is not just a traditional Bengali dessert; it is sheer beauty and a mouthful of nostalgia.



Joynagar Moas are crafted from aromatic popped rice mixed with jaggery, cashew nuts and raisins

Made mostly at home before or during Durga Puja, it is served to guests with other confections on the occasion of Vijaya Dashami. Also an integral part of offerings made to Lord Krishna during Janmashtami, the versatile Naadu finds its rightful place in the Nabanna platter served during Makar Shankranti.

The history of *moa* can be traced back to 1904 and it has always been synonymous with Joynagar, even though many other adjoining settlements also specialise in making this indigenous sweetmeat. The confection is crafted from aromatic *khoi* – popped rice – mixed with jaggery, sugar, cashew nuts and raisins. There are over two hundred sweet shops around Joynagar, which produce Joynagar *moas* with the original ingredients. A winter specialty, the *moa* is now also being exported to the Middle East and some European countries.

Mrinalini Devi, Rabindranath Tagore's wife, was an excellent cook like several other women from the Tagore clan. Among her signature dishes was a



The kitchen at Jorasanko has produced some unusual sweetmeats for family members and guests



Elo-jhelo is a signature dish produced by Mrinalini Devi, Rabindranath Tagore's wife, that was inspired by the humble Gaja

Some experts tell us that sweets are God's creations. Some say, they are works of art. Whatever be their description, Bengali *mithaai* is adored by fans for their taste and never-ending variety. Most localities in Kolkata boast of their own *mishti'r dokaan* peddling a particular variety of Rosogolla or Sandesh that has stood the test of time. Bengalis have a stronger sweet tooth than other communities in India. And in most Bengali households, even an ordinary meal concludes with a sweet dish.

Sweets are also at the root of Bengal's culture and tradition. Be it during festivals or weddings or just





Shor Bhaaja of Krishna Nagar is definitely a celebrated sweet of this town renowned for its Vaishnav temples



Mecha Sandesh of Beliapore is also famous in Bankura – a mouthwatering combination of chhaatu, chhena, khoya, sugar and ghee



Narajol in Midnapur boasts of a special Mooger Jilipi or jalebi crafted from moong daal



Daspur's Bataasha, a sugar candy used to sweeten water, is also offered to family deities

special kind of Gaja – deep fried fritters of flour and then sweetened with sugar syrup – which Rabindranath named Elo-jhelo. In his youth, Tagore was a gastronome and an excellent host who loved to treat his guests to exotic delicacies prepared by his wife and aunts and sisters-in-law. And as secretary of the Khamkheyali Shobha – an eclectic gathering of literary aficionados – after each session, guests were served exotic snacks like the Elo-jhelo, along with fragrant Jasmine tea imported from China.

Bengali sweets are certainly famous for their innovativeness and range. In spite of having such a wide variety, the Bhadrakalok treasures a special love for traditional creations not easily available in the local marketplace. Shor Bhaaja is definitely one such leading item. Krishna Nagar is the birth place of Shor Bhaaja.

**“ Bengali sweets are certainly famous for their innovativeness and range. In spite of having such a wide variety, the Bhadrakalok treasures a special love for traditional creations not easily available in the local marketplace ”**

Made of cream removed from the top of boiling milk and sometimes mixed with *khoya* and *chhena*, it follows one of the most tedious recipes, needing extreme patience and expert skills. There is a similar kind of sweet named Shorpuria, the only difference being that these cakes made from the cream of milk or *shor* are baked and not deep fried.

Kheer Mohan, a variety of Rosogolla, is rarely found in Kolkata. Jiagunge in Murshidabad district is its rightful home and popular for its sponginess and cardamom flavour. Mecha

Sandesh of Beliapore is also famous in Bankura – a mouthwatering combination of *chhaatu*, *chhena*, *khoya*, sugar and ghee.



There was a time when Bengal's sweets were completely indigenous and linked to the products that were produced in that particular area. Narajol in Midnapur is famous for *moong daal*. The sweet-makers of this region craft a special Mooger Jilipi or *jalebi* crafted from *moong daal*. The pulses are ground fine and given the shape of *jalebis* before they are fried and dipped in sugar syrup. Daspur's Bataasha, is just as famous. Each looks like a huge plate and is usually hung on a thread in front of the idols of Durga and Kali during the festive season.

Imagine a sweet linked to a famous Mughal Emperor and also a British officer! Yes, the famous Babarsa that must

**“ Imagine a sweet linked to a famous Mughal Emperor and also a British officer! Yes, the famous Babarsa that must be enjoyed with gur syrup or a bowl of honey. A heritage sweet that is fast vanishing from sweet shops in Midnapur as it is expensive to craft ”**

be enjoyed with *gur* syrup or a bowl of honey. A heritage sweet of Midnapur that is fast vanishing from sweet shops, it embraces more than two centuries of history. In the middle of 1740, the town of Khirpai was attacked several times by Maratha Bargis. Residents started leaving the area to escape these assaults. During this time, Edward Babarash, an English soldier, helped locals defeat the plunderers. A native trader named Babarasa was grateful to Edward and presented him with this special sweet. According to other sources, this confection was also presented to Emperor Babur in Delhi. Since then, its name has been Babarsa. The sweet looks like an *amarti* and is a mixture of warm ghee,



Babarsa, a heritage confection of Midnapur, is best enjoyed with gur syrup or a bowl of honey



The lyrically named Manohora of Janai was invented at the orders of a local zamindar



The Langcha of Shaktigarh saved a Burdwan princess from wilting away during her pregnancy

flour and honey. Few shops make this old sweet as it is expensive to craft.

Another local sweet – a variation of Ledikeni and Pantua – is the Langcha, made from *khoya* and flour. According to local stories, the credit of creating Langcha goes to a Langcha Dutta of Shaktigarh. And a matrimonial alliance between the royal families of Krishna Nagar and Burdwan changed the genesis of this *mithai*. The fable elucidates that a beautiful princess from the Krishna Nagar palace was married to a prince of the Burdwan royal household with great fanfare. However, when she became pregnant, she lost her appetite and refused to eat. She continued fasting, against medical advice, and would have died had she not been served a salver laden with the delicious Langcha – a sweetmeat similar to what artisans from her maternal home used to prepare.

It changed the fortune of the princess as well as the tiny village of Shaktigarh.

Jolbhora – a close cousin of the celebrated Sandesh – also has an interesting past. About a hundred years ago, a *moira* or a member of the clan of sweetmeat makers named Surya Kumar Modak was commissioned by a local *zamindar* of Chandannagar to prepare something special for a grand feast. After several attempts, Modak came up with the idea of pouring syrup – rose or *nolen gur* – into a shell of Sandesh. Thus was born the Jolbhora and it is said that several members of the Tagore family soon became its diehard addicts.

The sleepy town of Janai in Hooghly is the birthplace of the lyrically named Manohora, literally meaning ‘the one who steals the heart’ in Bengali. According to Janai-lore, a *moira* was entrusted with the task of preparing something special for a *zamindar* family patriarch who was returning home after a long trip. The *zamindar* got delayed and the poor *moira*, worried that the sweet would go bad, dunked the sugar-coated *malaai*-rose-cardamom *laddoos* in sugar syrup to preserve them. The result was the unparalleled Manohora, a name apparently given by the patriarch himself after just one bite. And a sweetmeat that lives up to its name even today was thus birthed.

These are some lesser known Bengali sweets – sweet nothings – in a plethora of honeyed offerings that tickle the tongue and keep the appetite alive and happily kicking! ✨



“*Shamney tahaar khaddo jholey, jar jey rokom ruchi  
Monda mithai, chop-cutlet, khaja kimba luchi  
Monn boley taai 'khabo-khabo', mukh choley taai khetey  
Mukher shongey khaabar chhotey palla diye motey!*”

*(Food is dangled before them, according to varied taste  
Sweets, chops, cutlets and luchis to be gobbled in great haste  
The mind says 'yum-yum' and sets off to gulp  
The mouth gives chase even as the goodies turn to pulp!)*

*Sukumar Ray*





“ *The thin line between Rasgulla and Rosogolla  
Is where the emotions lie...* ”

*Anonymous*

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