

How sweet, Portuguese

What is Puja without Bengali sweets? And what would they be but for certain sailors from afar, wonders **Paromita Sen**

Vijaya Dashami may be a bittersweet day but it is synonymous with sweets. In fact, tradition has it that one cannot bid goodbye to Ma Durga without offering her *sandesh*. Everyone else has to be fed sweetmeats after the immersion.

There are two epochs in the history of Bengali sweets — before the Portuguese and after them.

Before, there was — according to the *Chaitanyacharitamrita*, a biography of the 16th century religious reformer by his contemporary Krishnadas Kabiraj — *dug-dha lakkaki* (known now as *rabri*); *sarbhaja*; *sarpupree* (modern *sarpuria*); sweets made of popped, puffed or flattened rice combined with white or brown sugar (*moas*); and *narus* made of coconut, ground legumes or sesame seeds.

To preserve milk in this climate, it was necessary to bring it to the boil again and again. Once it cooled, a fatty layer of “skin”, called *sar* in Bengali, would form on top. That would be skimmed off and pressed onto the other layers. The *rabri* is these thick blobs of deliciousness in sweetened milk, *sarbhaja* is *sar* deep fried in ghee and dunked in syrup, while *sarpuria* has layers of fried *sar* alternated with crushed almonds and *khoa kheer*, all of it soaked in sweetened milk.

While shops still stock these sweets, they are not the ones famous worldwide as Bengali sweets.

That honour belongs to the *rasogolla* and, to a lesser degree, the *sandesh*. Both these sweetmeats, though very different in texture, are made with the same ingredients — sugar and *chhana* or cottage cheese. They belong to the second epoch of Bengali sweets along with such bites of deliciousness as the *pantua* or *ledikeni*, *langcha*, *chamcham*, *chhanar jilipi*, *rasamalai* and *rajbhog*.

The main difference between the two epochs is in the use of cottage cheese. Actually, there is



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a second difference — the sweets of the second epoch were all invented by *moiras* or professional sweet-makers.

In 1580, the Portuguese were given permission to settle in Bandel, now a town 50 kilometres from Calcutta. The Portuguese were a seafaring people and Bandel comes from *bandar* or port. “They learnt to preserve food so that they could carry it along on their sea voyages. One of the things they carried with them was cheese,” says academic Purba Chatterjee who is studying the intangible heritage the Portuguese left us.

“The cheese that they made can still be found in a few shops in New Market and is called Bandel cheese. To make it in large quantities, the Portuguese employed local people. That is how Bengalis were introduced to the process of making cottage cheese,” Chatterjee explains.

“They [the Portuguese] loved cottage cheese, which they made



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by ‘breaking’ milk with acidic materials. This routine technique may have lifted the Aryan taboo on deliberate milk curdling and given the traditional Bengali *moira* a new raw material to work with,” writes food historian K.T. Acharya in *Indian Food, a Historical Companion*.

Before this, Bengalis did not use *chhana* to make sweets.

An offering for the gods, sweets could not be made from “*chhinna*” or torn milk.

But deliberately curdling milk was a different matter and, eventually, “The Vaishnavites of Chandernagore learnt to stir *chhana* and sugar together until smooth before shaping them into round balls and offering them to the gods,” says Chatterjee.

“It is also of interest that the word *chhana* has a separate meaning in colloquial Bengali — children or offspring. And if one considers curdled milk to be the ‘offspring’ of untreated milk, then this

is indeed a serendipitous example of double entendre,” writes Chitrita Banerji in her book *The Hour of the Goddess: Memories of Women, Food and Ritual in Bengal*. While *chhana* might have been accepted in Bengali homes, it was not until a *moira* took an interest in it that sweets made of cottage cheese attained mass popularity and fame.

Sometime in the 18th century, a man named Surjya Modak travelled to Bandel to learn the art of making cottage cheese from the Dutch cook of Bandel Church. He then plied his trade from Chandernagore.

Modak is credited with creating the *motichur sandesh*, which is nothing like the popular *motichur* laddu. His *motichur* is a barely sweetened bit of smooth *chhana* flavoured with rose water and kept together with a twist of waxed paper. Tagore is said to have named this sweet after ground pearls. Modak also came up with the *narom paker kheerpuli* (made of *chhana*, not *kheer*), a boat-shaped sweet that he dedicated to ship-travelling traders. But his most famous creation is the *jolbhora sandesh*.

“The wife of the zamindar of Telenipara wanted a special *sandesh* that she could use to trick her new son-in-law. Surjya and Siddheshwar Modak came up with a *narom pak sandesh* that held within it sweetened rose water. A bite and the liquid oozed out, staining the fine attire of the *jamai*,” says Saibal Modak, a great-grandson of Surjya Modak. That was in 1881.

It was Lalit Mohan Modak, Surjya’s grandson, who created the *talshash*-shaped mould that led to the *sandesh* being renamed *jolbhora talshash sandesh*. *Talshash* is the Bengali name for doug palm. And in Calcutta, Nabin Chandra Das created — or refined, depending on who is telling the story — the *rasogolla*, a ball of *chhana* boiled in syrup until it doubles in size.

As we wish each other Subha Vijaya, let’s not forget to thank the Portuguese.