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Calcutta - The Sweet Essence of the World

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Abstract:

Every society is dynamic having its own likes and preferences towards certain kinds of food and food habits. These preferences crop up from traditions, climate be it environmental or cultural, myths, as well as availability. Man eats only what he chooses to and that is often marked by economic, socio-cultural or nutritional factors or some kind of symbolic ratification attached to it. Therefore forming the culture and expressing the identity of the man. Thus food is analogous to culture by the way it is consumed, compiled, assembled, prepared and by all the conventions fastened to it, and culture is definitely dynamic born out of complex exchanges, diverse interactions and tastes from all around the world.

This article explores the gastronomic culture of the Bengalis, their immense love for sweets as well as influence of the British and the Portuguese on traditional sweetmeats.

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There is an Irish proverb which goes something like this “Laughter is brightest where food is best”. A point very well proved in the city of Calcutta known for its exuberant catalogue of gastronomic delights and no wonder called the city of joy. If someone wants to know the real old Calcutta, he can easily sit outside a neighbourhood sweet shop and observe the heterogeneous throngs of people buying the gastronomic delicacies anytime of the day. Every Bengali has a sweet tooth barring a handful of exceptions and their love for mishti is the reason behind the conjuring up the list of lip smacking calorie laden specialities.

One can think that mishti forms the very foundation of the Bengali culture. Take that away and you will have to face the wrath of thousands of angry Bengalis all over the world ready to tear you into pieces. Relationships are often formed especially outside the sweet shops when the regulars sit outside with a glass of milky tea and a variant of *mishti*, which is quite culture defining. In many ways the neighbourhood sweet shop spells out the character of the entire neighbourhood.

Bengali cuisine exclusively boasts of having the multi course tradition among all the states in India which quite sufficiently resembles the *service à la russe* of France. Food is served in a course wise fashion rather than all at once. Bengalis love spices, the aroma of mustard oil and not to mention their undiluted passion for fish. It is a part of the tradition to eat and savor all the dishes separately with rice starting from eating a bitter vegetable dish mainly comprising bitter gourd, graduating to lentils which is often accompanied by a fried fish or fried vegetable fritters. After this it is the turn of an elaborate preparation like *ghonto* or *chochori* which might be a medley of fresh vegetables, spices and often fish. This is followed by a fish curry which they cook in many ways such as steaming, frying or preparing not so subtle gravy made of fiery mustard paste thickened with poppy seeds or coconut milk. Then there is a delicious mutton curry which again is spiced up and after that is the serving of *ambal* or chutney, a sweet sticky jelly like treat with dry fruits like dates and *aam shotto* (mango leather or dried mango pulp strips) simmered slowly with the plumpest and juiciest tomatoes of the season or made with seasonal fruits like apples and pineapples. This sweet and sour chutney may reflect the influence of Portuguese pickle makers. Europeans used sorbet to cleanse their palate and chutneys played the same role here. And finally arrives the mishti or the sweet delicacies!

Bengali sweets are made from curdled milk which is quite different from North Indian or Pakistani sweets which are made from *kheer* or thickened milk. The usage of curdled milk began from the Middle Ages and its adoption in the making of sweets dramatically changed the Bengali *mishti* scenario.

It cannot be said when the Bengalis began to make and savour sweets. In olden times, sweets were made out of paddy and sugarcane. They were prepared at home and offered to guests, ingredients often ranging from grounded pulses, *moori* (puffed rice), *chira* (flattened rice), rice flour or broken rice grains, to which sweeteners like *gur* (jiggery) or grated coconut, sugarcane, palm or date juices, and milk were added. In recent times, a great variety of methods are implemented to make sweets look attractive and enhance their tastes. Cassia leaves (leaves that are similar to cinnamon leaves, just more pungent), cardamom powder, dry fruits like resins and cashew nuts, orange rind, seasonal fruits, popular ones being kiwis and strawberries are used for flavour and decoration. Colours and moulds of various kinds distinguish the look as well as entice the taste buds.

Sweets are an indispensable and integral part of all festivals and hospitality. It is considered to be a blasphemy if sweets are not offered during any kind of festivals with people commonly rejoicing in the sobriquet of *mishtis*. It is interesting to note that each occasion demands a specific variety of sweetmeats to enhance gustatory experience. Now as they say in Bengali “*Baro Mase Tero Parbon*”, meaning thirteen festivals in twelve months, clearly indicates the sheer abundance of festivities of the state and hence, the myriad variety of sweets. It has been observed that traditionally societies have programmed themselves by associating themselves with the preparation and consumption of food that are festival specific. For instance, Poushparbon which is a folk festival ushering the new crop Nabanna desires the essential *Pithe*, cakes primarily made of rice flour or wheat flour and optionally has a sweet or savory filling in its pouch or *khol*. Generally, the filling or *pur* is of rice, coconut, milk and molasses. There are different sorts of this dish like *pithe puli*, *asskey pithe*, *patishapta*, *ranga alur pithe*, *dudh puli*, *rash puli*, *gokul pithe*, etc. Platefuls of specialties are exchanged among relatives and neighbours. Then there is Dol Purnima with its colourful *math* and *kadma*, Janmashtami with its significant *taler bara*, *malpoa*, *narkel naru* and *payesh*, Lakshmi Puja with its *murki*, *batasha*, and *nakuldana* plus *tiler naru*, *tiler kathi* and *katkati*, Rathajatra marked by *jilipi* and *amritti*, Itu Puja with *nalén gurer talshash sandesh*, Saraswati Puja where it is a sacrilege not to taste the *dadhikarma*, a mixture of *mishti doi*, *khoi*, *chire*, *batasha*, *sandesh* and bananas, and the list goes on. Other festivities like *Poila Boishak* (the Bengali new year), *Annoprashan* (christening ceremony), *Poitey* (thread ceremony), *Bhaiphonta* (a ritual involving brother and sister), etc., are all occasions laced with gifts and sweets.

It also has some foreign influences mainly from the British and the Portuguese. The Portuguese came to Bengal in the year 1517. Bengal was then a rich prosperous land popularly known as “the Paradise of India. By 1670s there were around 20,000 Portuguese, spread across Hooghly, Satgaon, Chittagong, Banja, Dacca and other ports. They led self-indulgent lives and their opulence was visible in their clothes, lifestyle and food. One of their specialties was their creation of sweet delicacies made from oranges, lemons, ginger, pickle and mangoes. Their bakers were also skillful in making bread, cakes and differently flavoured pastries which became quite popular.

The basic ingredients in making Bengali sweets are sugar and milk which is boiled and thickened to produce *khoa* or curdled with lemon juice to make casein or *chhana*. Now there is a debate regarding who invented the *chhana*. Some say it was born during the 19th century when West Bengal had plenty of unsold milk left which would sour to form *chhana*. This *chhana* was then mixed with *gur* and sugar to make it appetizing. This soft mixture was called “*makha*” which was the trailblazer of the *sandesh*. Others argue that this was more of a Portuguese contribution. The French traveller François Bernier, who lived in India from 1659 to 1666, wrote: ‘Bengal is celebrated for its sweetmeats, especially in places inhabited by the Portuguese, who are skilful in the art of preparing them and with whom they are an article of considerable trade.’ The Bengalis adopted the use of this new ingredient called *chhana* from these foreigners who used the technique to break milk with acidic components to produce curds. From then on sweetmakers began to amply use this new substance and invented quite a range of sweetmeats. One of the inventions was the *rosogolla*, a white ball of soft spongy *chhana* boiled in sugar syrup. The famous melt in the mouth delight was invented in 1868 by a poor Bengali Sri Nobin Chandra Das in his tiny Baghbazar shop when he boiled the casein balls in syrup, in an attempt to discover something to compete with the *sandesh*. *Rosogolla* has another variation where the finished balls are soaked in milk based syrup infused with saffron forming a creamy delicate treat called the *rosomolai*.

Sandesh, the trademark delicate sweet of the Bengalis was the mastermind of Sri Paran Chandra Nag, a sweetmeat artist from the Hoogly district who started a small shop especially to sell *sandesh* in the Bowbazar area of Kolkata in 1826, his regulars being Raja Rammohan Roy, Rani Rashmoni and Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay. These small specimens were made by mixing *chhana* which was flavoured with nuts, fruits, rose water and vanilla extract. The paste was then cooked in some clarified butter and then moulded into shapes resembling flowers, shells and fruits. The texture was soft, spongy or hard. *Sandesh* has seasonal flavourings too with jiggery in the spring, sap of the date palm in the winter, and fruits all year round. Nowadays the assortment of *sandesh* is absolutely mind boggling with a vast collection of flavourings and shapes to choose from. Chocolate has become quite a rage with chocolate *sandesh* filling up the shelves of every sweet shop.

Records indicate that in the year of 1871, Calcutta had its own mini version of London’s Mayfair, built by the Calcutta Corporation. It was named Hogg Market and it became the hub for European cuisine and everything from turkey to pork chops to pastries and patties were made available. Nahoum’s Confectioners introduced these foreign delicacies to the Bengali Babus and their puff pastries with stuffing soon became a rage. It is also told that cream cutlets and tipsy puddings were concocted at the Sovabazar Rajbari. *Empress Gaja*, a sweetmeat, was also introduced at the Sovabazar Rajbari for Queen Victoria though sadly its recipe is lost in the pages of history and is now just a figment of the memory. Another sweet made of browned cottage cheese called *Ledikeni* was made just for Lady Canning by Bhim Nag, a famous sweet seller of Bengal. It is still available and is quite a popular choice for sweet lovers. *Custel Brun* or the caramel custard has also come from the time of the Raj and is featured as one of the Dak Bungalow dessert, Dak Bungalows being the rest stops of the British when they were touring.

The Indians who accumulated immense wealth during the British regime displayed their affluence through decorating their houses with European curios as well as through their food. Each occasion was celebrated with a flamboyant variety of sweets decorated with gaudy silver and gold leaves. The most acclaimed amongst these was the *ledikeni* or Lady Kenny. The story behind this particular syrup soaked light fried reddish brown sweet ball was that in the 1860s Bhim Chandra Nag prepared this new sweet in the honour of Lady Canning on her birthday. Another version of this story was that after she tasted the new sweet she savored it so much and she demanded to have it on every occasion, thus it was named after her. There is though another legend which states that this product was created by the sweet makers of Bahrapur in 1857, after the mutiny, to celebrate the visit by the viceroy and his wife. From then on *ladikeni* was an indispensable part of any menu. It was not just the taste that attracted sweet lovers but the novelty in the name. Hence,

confectioners to captivate the interests of the people started giving unique names to their products. A *sandesh* was named after the Lord Ripon who was the viceroy from 1880 to 1884. Another *sandesh* was named after the visiting Soviet premier Nikolai Bulganin called the *Bulganiner Bishmoy* in the 1960s. Some more examples are *desh gorob* (glory of the nation), *manoranjan* (heart's delight), *monohara* (captivator of the heart), *pranahara* (captivator of the soul), *abak* (wonder), *nayantara* (star of the eye), *bagh* (tiger), and *abar khabo* (i will have another one) (Sen, 2000). The eminent sweet-makers of the mid-nineteenth century were Makhlan Lal, S.K. Modak, Bhim Chandra Nag, Nabin Chandra Das, and Sen Mohashir. The latter three still dominates the sweet scene today.

Even now *mishtis* hold a very integral part of a Bengali's life though the symbolic attachment has reduced with time. There have been changes in the ingredients as well as the methods to prepare sweets now to suit the clients of the present society. Because of health issues confectioners have been rendered to conceive sweets to meet the demands of obese, diabetic or dieting clients. Hence, the varied and innovative sugar free sweets available these days. But sweets are the cultural reality of Bengal and sugar or sugar free, sweets will always have a place in the hearts and stomachs of all Bengalis whether residing in Kolkata or any corner of the Earth and with every mouthful, with every bite he/she is only too happy to dive into these soft intricate gourmet wonders and forget the worries of the world.

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