

c. Exotique Jalbhara: Avant-garde riverine sweet

Antara Mukherjee

Sweet or 'Misti' is an indelible part of Bengali culture, for offering sweets to guests is a typical welcoming gesture of cordiality and amity in Bengali households. In the chapter entitled 'The Romance of Bengali Sweets', from *Bengal Sweets* (1926), a recipe book for Bengali sweets, J. F. Alder sheds light on this indelible Bengali custom: "Sweets have also been accepted as an emblem of hospitality by every stratum of society in every part of Bengal" (2). She categorises between two types of sweets, 'Mithai' and 'Monda': sweets prepared without the help of milk and with the help of it. 'Mithais' are mostly prepared from flour and pulse while 'Mondas' are milk based. Before colonial settlements, Bengali confectioners, popularly known as 'Modoks' or 'Moiras', prepared sweets mostly from 'Kheer' or condensed milk, white sugar, coconut, and jaggery. 'Kheer' was the primary ingredient for sweets. Transition from 'Kheer' to 'Chena' or curdled milk as the base material for preparation of variety of sweets was a watershed moment in the sweet history of Bengal.

The use of 'chena' by the 'Modaks' of Hooghly owes its origin to two primary sources. Local historian and Associate Professor, Dr. Biswanath Bandyopadhyay, in an informal chat with the author, reveals that majority of Bengali population in pre-colonial Chandernagore belonged to the labouring agricultural and artisan castes like 'Kaibarta'

(fishermen and peasants). 'Tanti' (weavers), 'Dhopa' (washermen), 'Goala' (milkmen) and 'Chutor' (carpenter). These communities were inclined towards Vaishnavism, which allowed a more permissive and liberal social lifestyle than the rigid Brahmanical order that ruled Calcutta Bengali society. No wonder Chandernagore is noted for a large concentration of Vaishnavites who offered 'Monda' prepared out of 'chena' or soft mass of curdled milk, as the prime offering to Lord Krishna. Interestingly enough, the nomenclature 'chena' could probably be derived from its formative process. Generally speaking, the extraction of 'chena' happens by acid coagulation of hot milk and by draining out the whey. The milk, as if, becomes 'chinno' or torn into pieces, or spoiled. Since it would be sacrilegious to offer spoiled item to God, probably the Vaishnavites mixed 'chena' with sugar and continuously stirred it to form a thick smooth paste which was offered to Lord Krishna. Incidentally, this thick smooth paste came to be used as base material for preparing different varieties of 'sandesh' by putting it into different moulds.

Added with the use of 'chena' as a religious offering from the Vaishnavites, the 'Modaks' are also indebted to the European settlements which played a key role in the social history of 'sandesh' in Hooghly. Incidentally, Portuguese traders started 'trade from India to India' or Intra - Asian

trade in sixteenth century. In *Europeans in Bengal in the Pre-Colonial Period*, Prakash and Chakraborti point out that for this purpose the Portuguese "first came to Bengal in the second decade of the sixteenth century (21)". In *History of the Portuguese in Bengal* J. J. A. Campos identifies three Portuguese settlements in Hooghly district— first, in Satgaon, second in Hooghly and the third in Bandel. Campos informs us that it was Emperor Akbar who was very impressed with Pedro Tavares, a man well versed in politics and state affairs, the founder of settlement at Hooghly: "He gave him many valuable presents and a *farman* permitting him to build a city in Bengal wherever he liked. He granted the Portuguese full liberty with leave to preach their religion and build Churches and even baptize the gentiles with their consent" (Original emphasis; 52). The arrival of the Portuguese largely affected the socio-cultural lives of indigenous people. Food historians, Chitrita Banerjee and Chermaine O'Brian tell us of the Portuguese contribution in the use of 'chena' in Bengal's food culture. O' Brien, particularly, mentions that commodity laden Portuguese ships that left from local ports needed food that could be stored. This might have led to the training of local confectioners with the art of preparing 'chena'. The Portuguese and the Dutch were fond of cottage cheese and were skilled in the art of preparing sweet fruit preservatives. The Dutch cook of Bandel Church – the first Augustinian church which was built at Bandel in 1599 and where the Portuguese sailors

stayed for a long time – used cottage cheese to prepare sweet fruit preservatives. They introduced the renowned native confectioner of Chandernagore, Suriya Modak, with 'cottage cheese'. The web portal of Suriya Modak [<http://www.jalbharsurjyamodak.com/profile.html>] credits the Dutch cook of Bandel Church for introducing the 'Moiras' of Hooghly to cottag. cheese. Aware of the procedure of mixing chena with sugar to form 'sandesh' and now armed with this new product of the colonial encounter, cottage cheese, the 'Modaks' of Chandernagore, creatively devised innovative ways of preparing a plethora of sweets products out of 'chena' and cottage cheese in the late nineteenth century Hooghly.

Among the various types of 'sandesh' prepared by the renowned confectioner Suriya Kumar Modak, it is 'Jalbhara sandesh' which is the signature 'sandesh' of Chandernagore. As a product of intangible cultural heritage, 'Jalbhara sandesh' bear testimony to a continuing cultural practice of impeccable historical importance in Chandernagore. In 1818, Suriya Kumar Modak received an interesting order from the Zaminder of Mankundu, adjacent town of Chandernagore, to prepare a rare 'sandesh' to outwit his new son-in-law on the occasion of 'Jamai Sasthi', a feast prevalent among the Hindus in Bengal in honour of son-in-law. Accordingly, Surja Modak and his son Siddheswar Modak inserted an oasis of rose-syrup within the throat-drying 'sandesh'. The idea of adding rose-syrup into the tiny honey-comb within