



Chhana Sweets of West Bengal: A Culinary Legacy and Cultural Marker

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Received: 01 Mar 2025; Received in revised form: 29 Mar 2025; Accepted: 05 Apr 2025; Available online: 09 Apr 2025

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Abstract— *One of the lasting legacies of the cultural interaction between Portuguese, the earliest of the European settlers, and the Bengalis, was the use of curdled milk to create chhana, a form of fresh curd cheese that became the base for most Bengali sweets. Chhana became the primary ingredient in many iconic Bengali sweets like rasogolla, sandesh and rasomalai. These sweets distinguish Bengali cuisine from the rest of India, where sweets are typically made from thickened milk (kheer), lentils (dal), flour or semolina. The evolution of Bengali chhana sweets has functioned as the cultural marker of a community known for its artistic and cultural excellence, not only in India but across the globe.*



Keywords— *Chhana, Moira, Nutraceutical, Rasogolla, Sandesh*

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Sweets are a shared passion among the Bengalis, transcending mere food to become a cultural identity marker. In Kolkata, the capital of West Bengal, it is rare to find someone without a strong opinion on the best sweetshop, the finest sandesh, or the state of modern dessert artistry. While many Indians are fond of sweets, the Bengali appetite for them is exceptional. In 2003, despite comprising only 8% of India's population, West Bengal consumed half of the nation's sixteen billion rupees' worth of sweets. About one million people worked in the state's 100,000 sweetshops, in 2010, testifying to the significance of sweets in Bengal's cultural and economic life (cited in Krondle 58). Bengal's chhana-based sweets, such as 'rasogolla', 'sandesh', 'pantua' and 'rasomalai' have earned a prominent place not only in the culinary traditions of India but also in the hearts of sweet lovers across the globe. While sweets have always been a part of Indian cuisine, Bengal's contribution to this domain is unparalleled, particularly due to its innovative use of chhana (curdled milk). Historically, sweets made from ingredients such as lentils, grains, and flour were popular in Bengal, but the arrival of chhana changed the region's culinary landscape forever. This

transformation was not an isolated development but the result of a historical encounter with the Portuguese settlers in Bengal in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The Portuguese brought with them their culinary traditions, and one of their significant contributions to Bengali cuisine was the introduction of cheese-making techniques. This eventually evolved into the creation of chhana, which laid the foundation for the Bengali sweet industry as we know it today.

The use of milk in Bengali cuisine has been traced back to medieval Bengali literature by Chitrita Banerji (Banerji 2017, 2000). Long narrative poems from the era describe the relationship between food and human temperament. For instance, the sixteenth century poem *Chandimangalkabya*, written by Mukundaram Chakrabarty, distinguishes between the foods offered to Shiva and Vishnu, with milk-based foods symbolizing nobility and serenity. Desserts such as rice pudding, sweetened yogurt, and kheer (boiled milk) were common and played a significant role in festive and ritual meals. Medieval Bengali sweets were typically made from milk, but not from chhana. Historical works such as Krishnadas Kabiraj's *Chaitanyacharitamrita*, a biography of the religious reformer Shri Chaitanya, provide a detailed account of the vegetarian meals prepared for him,

including a wide array of milk-based sweets. “Krishnadas ... mentions an impressive array of purely milk-based sweets – kheer mixed with sliced mangos, sweet yoghurt, and items like dugdha-laklaki [known today as raabri], sarbhaja, [and] sarpupee [known as sarpuria now] For those unfamiliar with Bengali food, some explanation of these terms is required in order to appreciate the point made earlier – the taboo on making a deliberate, invasive change to the nature of milk which, clearly, still prevailed at this time. ... [These sweets] are mutations of sar [‘malai’], which is as precious to the people of the Indian subcontinent as cream is to the people of the west” (Banerji, *How the Bengalis*, 52-3). Chhana was notably absent from these preparations, as the practice of curdling milk with acid was taboo in Aryan culture. Even in the myths surrounding Krishna, references to milk, butter, and yogurt abound, but none mention chhana. However, modern Bengali sweets are closely associated with chhana, highlighting the significant paradigm shift in the field of culture that occurred in the centuries following Shri Chaitanya.

The advent of the Portuguese on the western coast of India in 1498, led by the explorer Vasco da Gama, marked the beginning of a cultural and culinary exchange between Europe and India. While Goa, on the western coast, was heavily influenced by Portuguese culture, a smaller settlement in Bandel (deriving from the Persian word ‘Bandar’, i.e., port), near present-day Kolkata in West Bengal, also absorbed significant Portuguese influences. The Portuguese in Bengal, living luxuriously, employed Moghs (people from Chittagong) as cooks, who adapted European techniques and ingredients to suit local tastes. The arrival of the Portuguese introduced new food items and cooking techniques to Bengal. Portuguese settlers along the Hooghly River introduced acid-curd cheese-making techniques to the region. Bandel, a town 25 miles north of Kolkata, became a hub for Portuguese settlers and home to Bandel cheese. The method of production and preservation of this cheese were unique to the humid, tropical climate of Bengal. This technique also crossed over to the production of Dhakai paneer in Bangladesh, a smoked cheese with mild sour taste and a preservation method involving salt. One of the lasting legacies of this cultural interaction is the use of curdled milk to create chhana, a form of fresh curd cheese that became the base for most Bengali sweets. The Portuguese were already skilled in making cheese and other dairy products, and their technique of curdling milk with acidic agents was adopted by local confectioners known as ‘moira’. Though Bandel cheese and Dhakai paneer remain specialty items, chhana has become integral to Bengali sweet-making. The kneading of chhana to create a fine paste is crucial for the preparation of sweets like sandesh. Besides, chhana became the primary ingredient in many

iconic sweets like rasogolla, sandesh, pantua, chamcham, and raosmalai. These sweets distinguish Bengali cuisine from the rest of India, where sweets are typically made from thickened milk (kheer), lentils (dal), flour or semolina. The word chhana is linked to the Bengali verb ‘shana’, which means to knead, emphasizing the importance of this process. The metaphorical connection between milk and its offspring, chhana (one of the synonyms of the Bengali word ‘chhana’ being baby) adds a poetic layer to Bengali culinary tradition. Although there has been an opinion that curdling milk was practiced in India even before the Portuguese arrived, scholars like K. T. Achaya argue (Achaya 1994) that it was the specific influence of Portuguese cheese that may have wiped out the orthodox Hindu taboo on cutting the milk and preparing sweetmeats out of it as offering to the deities. Gradually kheer, sar (malai), flour, lentils, and other non-dairy ingredients were overtaken by chhana as the key ingredient of Bengali sweets.

Chhana-based sweets began gaining prominence in the mid to late nineteenth century, a time when Bengal was experiencing significant social and economic changes. Calcutta (now Kolkata), the capital of British India until 1911, became a hub of commerce and culture. A burgeoning urban middle class emerged, comprising government clerks, doctors, lawyers, and businessmen who had disposable income and a penchant for hosting social gatherings. Sweets became an integral part of Bengali hospitality and were offered to guests on various occasions. One of the early pioneers of Bengali chhana sweets was Bhola Moira, who, in 1851, opened a shop that became famous for its sandesh. Other sweet-makers soon followed, including renowned names like, Bhim Chandra Nag, Nobin Chandra Das, Girish Chandra Dey and Nakur Chandra Nandy (more popularly known just as Nakur), Balaram Mallick, and Surjya Kumar Modak (in Chandannagar, Hooghly – a district famous for its own class and variety of sweets). Nobin Chandra Das, often regarded as the inventor of rasogolla, revolutionized Bengali sweets with his creative approach and marketing strategies.

Nobin Chandra Das, born in 1846, was a man driven by the desire to create something original that would captivate the Bengali palate. In 1868, after many failed attempts, he successfully created the rasogolla by boiling small balls of chhana in sugar syrup, resulting in a soft, spongy sweet with a unique texture and taste. This invention, although slow to gain popularity initially, eventually became synonymous with Bengali sweets and earned Nobin Chandra Das the title of ‘Father of Rasogolla’. The origins of the iconic rasogolla, one of Bengal’s most famous sweets, are deeply intertwined with both Portuguese influence and the culinary traditions of neighbouring Odisha. There is historical evidence that suggests a similar curdled-milk sweet existed in Odisha for

centuries. The Jagannath Temple in Puri has long served chhana-based sweets as offerings to the goddess Lakshmi during the chariot festival (Rath Yatra), with some texts suggesting this practice dates back to the twelfth centuries. According to this input this particular sweet-making technique was probably brought to Bengal by migrants from Odisha or travellers returning from their pilgrimage to Puri's temple. This controversy eventually rolled over to a legal battle between West Bengal and Odisha for acquiring the Geographical Indication tag over the uniqueness of rasogolla.

In November 2017, the Geographical Indication (GI) Registry office in Chennai granted West Bengal a GI status for 'Banglar Rasogolla' following an application filed by the West Bengal State Food Processing and Horticulture Development Corporation Limited (WBSFPHDCL). Later, in 2019, Odisha also received a GI tag for 'Odisha Rasagola,' which is said to be produced in a village in Odisha called Pahala. The Chennai GI Registrar granted the GI tag to 'Banglar Rasogolla' primarily due to its uniqueness and adherence to the traditions of West Bengal. Odisha objected, claiming the sweet is a typical product of Odisha, but the registrar rejected the objection, citing that the objection was not filed in accordance with the required legal provisions. In 2018, the Odisha Small Industries Corporation Limited (OSIC Ltd.) and Utkal Mistanna Byabasayee Samiti filed a new application on behalf of Odisha. In July 2019, the GI tag was granted to 'Odisha Rasagola'. The decision was based on Section 2(e) of the Geographical Indications of Goods (Registration and Protection) Act, 1999, which states that a GI tag can be given if the product's quality, characteristic, or reputation is attributed to its geographical origin and is unique. The uniqueness of Odisha Rasagola lies in its light brown colour, soft texture, and less sweet taste, making it distinct from its West Bengal counterpart. Historical texts from Odisha also have referred to the dish, tracing it as far back as the twelfth century since when it has been used as an offering in the temple of Lord Jagannath. The decision to grant separate GI tags to both states protects the interests of producers in both states, prevents consumer confusion, and avoids future conflicts between the two parties. The dual GI tagging also promotes economic prosperity for both regions while maintaining the unique identities of their respective varieties.¹

However, it was in Bengal that the rasogolla was perfected, particularly by Nobin Chandra Das. According to the information available at the company's website "Nobin Chandra's ancestors were sugar merchants of considerable social standing. Hailing originally from the district of Burdwan, the Dases had made Kolkata their home for eight generations by now [1860s]. Their house on a horseshoe

bend on the river Ganges in Sutanotty (now Bagbazar), was well known even a century ago. Being respectable and prosperous sugar merchants, the family did not take kindly to Nobin Chandra's decision to be a sweetmeat seller. His family itself disdainfully referred to him as a 'moira'".² Despite their disdain, Nobin Chandra was driven by a desire to create a new sweet that would captivate the Bengali palate. After many attempts, he successfully crafted the rasogolla—a soft, spongy ball of chhana soaked in sugar syrup. His invention did not become an overnight success; it took years of persistence before the rasogolla gained widespread popularity, helped along by the enthusiastic endorsement of wealthy patrons like the merchant, Raibahadur Bhagwandas Bagla.

Confectioners like Krishna Chandra Das (the iconic K. C. Das, son of Nobin Chandra Das), contributed to the growth of Bengal's sweet industry by introducing innovations such as canned rasogolla, which allowed the sweet to be shipped across the country and abroad. The journey of the rasogolla from a humble sweet shop in Bagbazar, Kolkata, to a globally recognized dessert is a testament to the Bengali passion for sweets and entrepreneurship. The popularity of chhana sweets continued to grow, and soon sweet-makers across Bengal were competing to create new varieties. The creativity of Bengali sweet-makers knew no bounds, and they continued to experiment with new ingredients and techniques. The versatility of chhana allowed confectioners to push the boundaries of traditional sweets and appeal to changing tastes and preferences. Thus, the confectioners did not just create new sweets but also capitalized on branding and marketing by naming their creations after prominent figures of the time. For instance, the 'Ledikeni', a sweet made from semolina, chhana, and sugar, is said to have been named after Lady Canning, the wife of British India's first Viceroy. Similarly, sweets were named after other British dignitaries ('Riponbhog', after Lord Ripon, who succeeded Lord Lytton as Viceroy) and after the visiting Soviet leaders like Bulganin during the 1960s ('Bulganiner Bismoy', i.e., Bulganin's wonder), reflecting the social and political dynamics of the era (Sen 303). In fact, among the varied Bengali sweets, sandesh has always been known for its varieties. As Colleen Taylor Sen points out, the art of nomenclature reflects "their flavouring, texture, shape, size, design, ingredients, and the poetic fancies— or advertising flare— of their creators. 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'll have another)" (ibid. 301). Sandesh makers now add chocolate, apple, ice-cream, and other non-traditional flavourings, and make sandesh shaped like biscuits, cakes, chops, pastries, sandwiches, slices of toast,

and other Western food items. Even emblems of political parties are embossed in sandesh, especially before the elections of the members of the parliament or the state legislative assemblies. During the Bengali Hindu marriage ceremonies, a fish and /or butterfly shaped sandesh is/are indispensable in the list of items ('Tattwa') sent from the groom's house to the bride's in the forenoon of the nuptial day. The evolution of Bengali sweets was not limited to taste and creativity. As the industry grew, the art of sweet-making was preserved and passed down through generations, culminating in the development of recipe books that documented these desserts. In 1904, Bipradas Mukhopadhyay's *Mistanna Pak* became one of the first Bengali cookbooks to focus exclusively on sweets, including twenty-three different types of sandesh (Mukhopadhyay IX, 194-215). Other cookbooks like Mrs. J. Halder's *Bengal Sweets* (1921) further solidified (Halder 131-151) the role of sweets in Bengali culture.

As Bengal modernized, so did its sweet industry. In the mid-twentieth century, with the rise of industries and a growing middle class, sweet shops became a vital part of Bengal's cultural landscape. However, the modernization of the sweet industry also brought challenges. The increasing prevalence of diabetes and obesity among the population led to a growing demand for healthier alternatives. In response, many sweet shops began offering low-sugar and sugar-free versions of their traditional sweets. Hindustan Sweets in Kolkata, for example, developed a line of sweets with purported nutraceutical properties, aiming to counter the negative health perceptions associated with sweets. The rise of suburban developments and changing consumer habits also forced traditional sweet shops to adapt. Shops that were once confined to the old neighbourhoods of Kolkata began expanding to new locations, opening branches in shopping malls and residential areas. This shift was emblematic of a broader trend in the Indian food industry, where convenience and accessibility became key factors in driving sales. In suburban districts like Hooghly, as has already been mentioned, the glory has been radiating through confectioners like Surjya Kumar Modak, famous for 'Jalbhora Sandesh' (raw palm carnal shaped sandesh with its interior filled with rose syrup in such a way that an indecent bite might perplex the consumer with an unexpected flow of syrup ruining their dress and sobriety!)³, and delicacies like Manohara of Janai village.⁴ The globalization of Bengali sweets is another significant development in recent decades. With the Indian Diaspora spreading across the globe, Bengali sweets, especially rasogolla and sandesh, have found new connoisseurs across the globe, both Bengali and non-Bengali/Indian. In the present digital age, the online ordering system and the food

delivery chains have opened up an immense possibility in terms of advertising and marketing of Bengal sweets.

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