

India's First Battle of Rosogolla

The swords have been out in two historically friendly provinces of our beloved country, namely Odisha and West Bengal over a delicacy which has always inspired uplifting passions among their hoi polloi. The latest sabre-rattling between the two has started for a place of pride at the top of the gastronomical pecking order. A bitter war is said to be raging between the two over a sweet. The Odias' chutzpah in trying to pip the Bengali pride to the saccharine post has the latter's dander up. The sweet Bengali 'Bhadralok' is up in arms over Odisha's claim that the sultan of Indian sweets, the legendary 'rosogolla' originated in Odisha and not in Bengal. The Government of Odisha has already moved to obtain a Geographical Indication (GI) tag for our 'rosogolla'. The GI label, if granted, would fix Odisha's 'Pahala' as the place of origin for 'rosogolla' on the basis of myths and available literature.

This only means that Bengalis would no longer be able to boast of having invented the rosogolla, which, they strongly believe, is a delicacy synonymous with Bengali ontology in the wider world. The turn of events is indubitably cruel for Bengalis, coming as it does at a juncture when rosogolla is all set to cross the known boundaries of its fandom to subsume outer space. Desiccated canned rosogolla reportedly feature in the menu of India's first manned mission to moon by the Indian Space Research Organisation (ISRO) sometime in near future. The rosogolla factories across Bengal have not only served the national palate across the country in its multi-flavoured avatars, but have also provided gainful employment to hundreds of thousands of people across the country.

What is at stake here is not just Bengal's continued gastronomical hegemony in the world of bonbons, but also souring of a longstanding rapport between two neighbours. Odisha's encouragement to the putative division—as opposed to integration, which the soothing taste of rosogolla ought to inspire—between the people of the two states by asking for the sweet to be identified exclusively with Odisha is something the Bengali Bhadrlok refuses to accept.

The twist in the tale is the fact that Odias themselves are divided over rosogolla's origin. The rosogolla in Odisha traces its origin not only to 'Pahala', but also to 'Salepur' near Cuttack due to the culinary skills of a confectioner called Bikalanandar Kar. The rosogolla suggest

that the 'Pahala' and the 'Bikali rosogollas' are very different in taste and preparations even if they belong to the same state. Now, who can say with certainty that the 'Pahala' rosogollas are more authentic than its 'Bikali' variety? The GI tag requirements warrant that all attributes of a particular product are to be traced to the place of its origin. The residents of both these places namely Salepur and Pahala would like to claim the parentage to rosogolla, which itself feels 'juiced out' in this tug of war. The wisecrack suggests these two Odisha places to first battle it out between themselves before challenging West Bengal.

One Laxmidhar Pujapanda, the Public Relations Officer (PRO) of the Jagannath Temple in Puri says, "Rasgulla has been part of Rath Yatra rituals ever since the Jagannath Temple came into existence in the 12th century". However, there are few buyers to this claim and definitely none in West Bengal is willing to even entertain such a notion. The rosogolla fanatics and gourmet Bengalis counter-argue that the 'chhappan bhog', the ritual offering to Lord Krishna, in the Jagannath Temple does not mention rosogolla. They further maintain that the tradition of offering sweetmeat to deity originated in recent past only. The cheese or 'chhena' being taboo in Hinduism because the act of splitting milk was deemed profane, priestly offering of a sweet made of cheese as early as the 12th century seems highly unlikely.

Chitra Banerji, a noted historian, avers, "It is notable that in all the myths about the young Krishna, there are thousands of references to milk, butter, ghee and yoghurt, but none to cheese". Not only in mythology, cheese is conspicuously absent even in medieval Indian history. The historian also finds no mention of sweets with cheese base in numerous references to the medieval Hindu reformer Chaitanya who had great fondness for sweets. Another famed Bengali sweetmeat 'Sandesh' was made of *Khoa* or condensed milk solids. Cheese as a constituent of 'Sandesh' came to be used much later. The three acid-curdled cheeses known to Bengal namely the country 'chhana', 'Bandel cheese' and 'Dhakai paneer' (more like a tight feta) are said to have been introduced by the Portuguese colonisers.

The modern recipe of rosogolla preparation traces its genesis to a legendary Bengali confectioner from Kolkata called Nobin Chandra Das. It is he who is said to have first made the spongy rosogolla in 1868 by boiling the mixture of chhena and semolina balls in the sugar syrup in contrast to the mixture sans semolina in the original rosogolla in his sweet shop at Sutanati (present day Baghbazar), thereby also giving it a longer shelf life to make it a better commercial proposition. Even though the descendants of Das, who is often credited as the inventor of this royal Bengal sweet, claim that his recipe was original, another school says that Das only modified the traditional Odisha rosogolla recipe to produce its less perishable extant mutant. Whatever be the outcome of this dispute, one thing is certain that Nobin Chandra Das is to the confectionary what Steve Jobs is to the Smart Phone. As Shakespeare would have said, call the rosogolla of any origin, it would taste as sweet.

Yet another theory suggests that rosogolla was first prepared by Braja Moira in his shop near Calcutta High Court in 1866 two years before Das started marketing the delicacy as has been claimed by the food historian Pranab Ray in his 1987 book 'Banglar Khabar'. Yet another writer, Panchana Bandopadhyay wrote in 1906 that rosogolla was invented in 19th century by Haradhan Moira, a Phulia-based sweetmaker. '*Mistikatha*', a newspaper published

by West Bengal Sweetmeat Traders Association, suggests that many other people prepared similar sweets under different names such as 'gopalgolla' (prepared by Gopal Moira of Burdwan), 'jatingolla', 'bhabanigolla' and 'rasugolla'. Food historian Michael Krondl asserts that irrespective of its origin, the famed rosogolla most likely predates Nobin Chandra Das.

On a different note, one suggests treatment of the instant subject in a larger perspective with a view to resolution of differences which divide our dear rosogolla and makes its sweet taste bitter. As they say, only those cry over souring split milk who don't know how to make rosogolla out of it. After all, our cosmonauts munching on spongy rosogolla while levitating in outer space would hardly bother about its origin or a bitter fight on terra firma down below. For them, the divine flavour of rosogolla is enough to make them tearful while making them nostalgic about their motherland.

One acceptable solution of the 'sweet' problem could simply be to have multiple GI tags for rosogolla to identify it with its place of origin, e.g., 'Bengali rosogolla', 'Pahala rosogolla' or the 'Bikali rosogolla' for better accommodation of regional identities. Better still, instead of fighting a bitter battle over this heavenly delicacy, won't it be in the fitness of things to make the GI tag for rosogolla simply read 'India', in a proud assertion of our national identity, rather than sticking to a more parochial regional identity

Salient Points

- Odisha has moved to obtain a GI tag for 'rosogolla'.
- The sweet Bengali 'Bhadralok' is up in arms over Odisha's claim that the sultan of Indian sweets, the legendary 'rosogolla' originated in Odisha and not in Bengal.
- Rosogolla reportedly feature in the menu of India's first manned mission to moon by the ISRO.
- It is souring longstanding rapport between two neighbours.
- GI tag requirements warrant that all attributes of a particular product are to be traced to the place of its origin.
- Rasgulla has been part of Rath Yatra rituals ever since the Jagannath Temple came into existence in the 12th century.
- The modern recipe of rosogolla preparation traces its genesis to a legendary Bengali confectioner from Kolkata.
- Better solution would be to make the GI tag for rosogolla simply read 'India', in a proud assertion of our national identity, rather than sticking to a more parochial regional identity.

Glossary

Hoi polloi: the common people

Sabre-rattling: seeking to intimidate by an aggressive display of military power

Chutzpah: shameless boldness

Saccharine: sugary

Dander: temper

Ontology: the branch of metaphysics that studies the nature of existence or being as such

Indubitably: that cannot be doubted

Fandom: fans collectively

Desiccated: dehydrated

Canned: prepared in advance

Gastronomical: the art or science of good eating

Bonbons: a piece of confectionery

Culinary: used in cooking or the kitchen

Wiseacre: wise guy

Fanatics: a person with an extreme and uncritical enthusiasm

Gourmet: elaborately equipped for the preparation of fancy, specialised, or exotic meals

Profane: not devoted to holy or religious purposes

Avers: to assert or affirm with confidence

Munching: to chew with steady or vigorous working of the jaws

Terra: earth