



Crafting The Social Biography of Regional Sweets in Bengal

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Abstract:

Sweets are an integral part of Bengali socio-cultural life and are widely represented as a *social thing* shaped through collective practice. Different regions of Bengal are known for their distinctive sweets, and this perception of *singularity* is constructed through layered justifications. Such elements contribute to the making of sweet-related myths that not only enhance regional identity but also shape patterns of consumption and circulation with broader economic and cultural frameworks. Existing scholarship largely explains value formation through collective perception, yet remains insufficient in identifying the initial agents who construct and institute these meanings. The present study addresses this gap by examining how *singularity* is justified and how these claims are reconfigured within the process of commodification. The research is based on ethnographic research conducted in different regions, selecting eight sweetshops through purposive sampling, participant observation to understand behavioural practices, an unstructured interview schedule to articulate their perspective openly, and generating nuanced insights into the social life of sweets, and finally, narrative analysis to examine how producers or traders embed meaning in what they create.

Keywords: *Bengali Sweets, Singularity, social biography, climate, subjectivity.*

Introduction:

Sweets are integral to Bengali culture. Hence, literary works have extensively described how the use of sweets is embedded in the socio-cultural lives of people, portraying it as a '*social thing*' shaped by collective practice. Social usages determine the value of such objects, situating them within networks of ritual, hospitality, exchange, and everyday interaction. Simultaneous different parts of Bengal are known for their unique sweets. This perception of singularity is constructed through multiple layers of justification, including narratives, subjectivity, climate, etc. All contribute to the construction of the myth of sweets, which not only adds meaning to regional taste but also seems important in consumption and circulation within a broader economic and cultural framework.

Review of Literature:

Classical anthropologists hold the view that an object could only be meaningful if it exists in the structure. Furthermore, an object gets its meanings when the meanings are applied to it. However, the meanings depend on the interests of the people who apply the meanings to an object, and how it is perceived or internalised by others (Mintz 1985, 151-186). In respect of Bengal, the twentieth century has been described as the "Golden Age" of Bengali culture (Sankar 2005), through which its cultural groundwork was laid in the latter half of the nineteenth century. During this period, the colonial middle-class Bengali engaged in the process of self-fashioning, negotiating modernity through culinary innovation and selective incorporation of new tastes (Ray 2015). Food, including sweets, became a medium through which cultural distinction was articulated. At the sensory level, Besky reminds us that the body ultimately

validates claims of taste and quality. Recognition is therefore embodied as well as symbolic (Besky 2020). Meanwhile, Ishita Dey has examined the everyday functioning of sweetshops and the politics embedded in claims of authenticity. However, such an analysis, often genealogical in approach call for deeper engagement with what may be termed the sociability of sweets, such as the way they produce relationships, hierarchies, shared memories and economic strategies (Ray 2016).

Problem of the Study:

Scholarly works on sweets of Bengal show a descriptive analysis on sociality of sweets in Bengal culture and how it leads to normalcy in the everyday life of the people. But those remain limited to how the value is created through the perception of the people. Those studies remain silent on who initially created the value and how they incorporated to the sweets. Hence, the present study explores what justifies the perception of *singularity* attached to particular sweets and in what ways these are reconfigured within the process of commodification.

Methodology and Methods for Data Collection:

This ethnographic study was conducted in multiple phases of fieldwork. In the initial phase, primary data were collected on four important Bengali sweets—Binapani Mishtanno Bhandar and Shaymsunder Mishtanno Bhandar at Baharu and Shri Krishna Mistanno Bhandar at Jaynagar in South 24 Parganas District for *Moa*, Kunsut Sweets at Malda Town in Malda District for *Kunsut*, Manjushree Sweets at Bahrampur in Murshidabad for *Channa Bora*, Koushik Ghosher Bikhyato Lancha at Amrah-Shaktigarh in East Burdwan District for *Lyancha*. Those sweets are recognised in the region for their long-standing reputation and are also reflected through literary works, historical significance, and quality products. In that case purposive sampling method has been applied to select the eight sweetshops located in different regions. Further, the research employed two main qualitative methods: in-depth interviews using an unstructured questionnaire, participant observation for understanding behavioural aspects of the respondents and lastly, narrative analysis to understand how people are embedded with what they produce. An unstructured questionnaire is applied here to give the respondents the liberty to express their views openly without any strict ambience. In-depth interviews were carried out in those sweet shops where the current owners were present and willing to participate during the fieldwork. Thus, interviews were taken with Mahadeb Das (Owner) and Ganesh Das (Son) at Binapani Mishtanno Bhandar; Bablu Ghosh and Ranjit Ghosh (both brothers) at Shaymsunder Mishtanno Bhandar; Ashok Sarkar (owner) at Shri Krishna Mistanno Bhandar; Biswajit Saha at Kunsut Sweets; Arun Das at Manjushree Sweets; and Koushik Ghosh at Koushik Ghosher Bikhyato Lyancha. Participant observations were undertaken, particularly in situations where shop owners were either unable or unwilling to provide interviews during the fieldwork. In such cases, it was considered essential to closely observe and internalise the shop environment, including interaction between employees and customers, the conversation, product presentation style, and overall workplace dynamics.

Shaping Biography of Sweet Though Claims:

Arjun Appadurai identifies three forms of mythology that become attached to objects, shaping them as '*social things*' and contributing to what he calls the social '*Biography of Things*.' These include: 1) *mythologies* produced by the traders and speculators; 2) *mythologies* produced by the consumers, and 3) *mythologies* produced by the workers in the production (Appadurai, 2013, p. 48). In the present discussion, emphasis is placed on the perceptions of sweet tasters, particularly associate themselves with both the origins of sweets production and the eventual sites of consumption. To understand how their claims contribute to the construction of meaning and social life of sweets, which are prevalent in consumption, the narratives of sweetshop owners and associated people are critically analysed, especially their views on the subjectivity of sweets, identity formation, pattern of social usage, and the historical trajectories of their business.

I. Narrating Origins: Creating a Social Biography of Regional Sweets

Each sweet in Bengal is associated with a distinct history of invention. Sweets traders frequently draw upon those *myths* or *folklore* to explain the origins of their products. Such claims of unique historical roots serve to differentiate their sweets and highlight their richness and authenticity. Most traders assert knowledge of who invented a particular sweet, for whom it was created, and under what circumstances, presenting themselves as successors to that original tradition of production. Although multiple interpretations regarding the historical origins of those sweets exist, the present analysis focuses exclusively on the narratives articulated by traders themselves and examines how those accounts are employed to persuade customers and reinforce legitimacy.

While discussing the origin of *Channa Bora* at Bahrampur, Murshidabad, Arun Das explained –

“Around 130 years ago, Maharaja Manindra Chandra Nandi of Cossimbazar expressed his wish to present sweets to a British official. Accordingly, he instructed the confectioners of his estate to prepare a special sweet for them. This sweet was made from *Chhena* (cottage cheese) and refined flour, deep-fried in *Ghee*, and finally soaked in *Ros* (sugar syrup). The British official was highly pleased after tasting it and asked for its name. Since it was fried in *Ghee*, the Maharaja named it *Channa Bora*.” From then on, its journey began.”

From this narrative, several key themes emerge: firstly, *Channa Bora* is portrayed as having no existence prior to the historical event described; secondly, its origin is linked to a specific political context; third, the element of social reciprocity is central (a gift to British officials); fourth, its refined taste won colonial appreciation; fifth, recognition by authority enhanced its prestige; and lastly, the name of the sweet marks its formal identity.

Similarly, Koushik Ghosh of Koushik Ghosher Bikhyato Lancha described the origin of *Lyancha* as follows:

“When British officials travelled from Calcutta to meet the Maharaja of Burdwan, they would stop at Shaktigarh to rest. At that time, there were several sweet shops there, and they would eat sweets. One of the confectioners had a limp while walking, and the British began calling him ‘Lyancha’ (meaning ‘lame’ in Bengali). The sweet he served became very popular among them. Since he was known by that name, the sweet also came to be called *Lyancha*.”

This account suggests that: firstly, the consumption of *Lyancha* predated the specific historical encounter; secondly, British recognition played a significant role in popularising the sweets; third, its shop location along a travel route made it accessible to travellers seeking rest and refreshment.

Bablu Ghosh of Shaymsunder Mishtanno Bhandar, while speaking about the origin of *Moa*, stated:

“*Moa* began around 200 years ago during the *Zamindari* period. A man worked at a *Zamindar*’s house in our Sripur area and used to tap the date palm tree for sap. The sap was boiled to make jaggery, and from that the first *Moa* was prepared and offered to the *Zamindar* (Revenue collectors from the peasants on behalf of the British East-India Company). He liked it very much and advised that if these sweets were produced commercially, it would do well. That is how the business started.”

He further added: “Earlier, it was mainly sold in village markets and weekly *Hats*. From there, the trade expanded to other places.”

This narrative highlights four significant aspects: first, *Moa* is presented as emerging from a particular historical moment rather than existing beforehand; second, appreciation by a respected *Zamindar* granted it legitimacy; third, taste played a decisive role in its acceptance; and lastly, its distribution began in local markets before gradually expanding.

In contrast, Biswajit Saha of Kunsut Sweets argued that the origin of *Kunsut* is located in the Kunsut area (presently in the Chapai Nawabganj district in Bangladesh). In his words:

“This sweet called *Kunsut*, actually the successor of *Chum-Chum*, originated from the Kunsut area. Later, after partition, when he came to India, he opened this sweetshop in his ancestor’s place and hence the sweet got its name. We have been in the sweet business for four generations, but my father was the first to produce this sweet in Malda.”

This claim differs in emphasis: first, the sweet was transported from its original, well-known place of origin to a relatively unfamiliar market; second, its name retained the identity of its birthplace; and limited competition and efficient production contributed to its popularity.

Across those narratives, certain common elements connect regional sweets: historical continuity, the celebration of taste, recognition by influential figures, and the principle of reciprocity. Sweets traders consistently foreground these themes in their accounts. Classical economic anthropologists argue that social reciprocity forms a fundamental basis of human relationships, strengthening social bonds and generating shared meaning. In such exchanges, it is the attributed meaning of the object that sustains its value. Social uses of an object do not arise abruptly; earlier alternatives typically exist before a new one gains prominence. A sweet must either replace an earlier item or establish its own distinctive social significance. In both scenarios, social recognition remains essential. This explains the recurring references to

historical figures or respected personalities who initially endorsed and appreciated these sweets. Ultimately, sweet traders shape and present these perceptions in ways that support their commercial interests. Through narratives, product presentation, and other symbolic practices, they reproduce the same logic of reciprocal value, seeking recognition and validation from consumers while reinforcing the cultural and historical significance of their sweets.

II. Narrating Climate: Crafting Social Construction:

Regional sweet traders frequently emphasise the distinctiveness of their products in comparison to those of other regions. To support this claim, they advance various arguments highlighting the importance of local climate. According to them, weather conditions significantly influence not only the availability of certain sweets but also their texture, stability, and taste. They assert that the unique environmental characteristics of their region contribute directly to the uniqueness of their creations. Such perceptions become evident through close analysis of narratives.

Bablu Ghosh explained, “*Moa* is not available throughout the year. It is mainly prepared during the winter season, generally from around 20th November until the end of January, and sometimes up to February.” He further added, “Actually, this year the ideal temperature for making *moa* has not yet been reached. The winter has been delayed, so the perception of *moa* has also started late.”

Similarly, Mahadeb Das of Binapani Mishtanno Bhandar stated, “You see, *moa* is essentially a winter sweet. The colder the weather, the better the *moa*.”

Even during observation within these sweetshops, ongoing conversations between customers and shopkeepers regarding the quality of *Moa*. The shop owner and employees appeared to reassure customers that the *Moa* currently available was satisfactory, while simultaneously suggesting that superior quality could be expected toward the end of December or January, when colder conditions would prevail.

A sweetshop may be understood as a display space where sweets from different regions are presented and evaluated. Through claims about the distinctiveness of local weather, sellers not only justify the quality of their existing products but also seek recognition and generate anticipation among consumers, encouraging a shared perception of the product's special status. If climate indeed is considered a decisive factor in determining the quality, production, and market availability of *Moa*, it can be assumed that similar environmental conditions were emphasised when the sweet was first introduced into the local market. At that time, comparable arguments about seasonality and quality may have been used to persuade those unfamiliar with the new product. Gradually, through such a process of persuasion, recognition, and repeated exchange, *moa* gained local acceptance and eventually became embedded in the socio-cultural life of the community.

III. Narrating Subjectivity of Sweets: Endorsement of Taste

For any foodstuff, taste plays a decisive role in attracting attention and gaining acceptance. At the same time, taste is deeply subjective; it is experienced through the senses and interpreted at the individual level. The way a person perceives taste determines whether a foodstuff will be incorporated into everyday consumption. However, before such incorporation occurs, the product must first receive recognition. Only after being acknowledged does it gradually enter into regular usage. This raises an important question: from whom does this recognition originate? At an initial level, approval may come from individuals within the immediate social environment. Yet, on a broader scale, recognition from a predominant contributor significantly contributes to wider community acceptance, popularity, and eventual market expansion. Traders, therefore, invoke the approval of influential personalities to enhance the reputation of the product, which has already moved beyond a purely private or primary sphere. In matters of taste, one must first experience the food before recommending or validating it for others. In many narratives, especially those linked to the colonial period, traders claim that sweets such as *Lyancha*, *Channa Bora*, and *Moa* were appreciated by colonial administrators or local *Zamindars*. However, it is unlikely that producers themselves had not tasted their creations before presenting them to such influential figures. If the taste had been unsatisfactory, it might have resulted in reprimand or loss of prestige. Therefore, traders' justification regarding taste requires closer scrutiny and interpretation.

The subjectivity of sweets extends beyond taste alone. It encompasses size, texture, shape, colour, visual appeal, ingredients, and method of preparation, nutritional value, and above all, taste. Initially, this subjectivity is introduced and framed by sellers or producers through narratives as well as through strategic presentation, such as attractive showrooms, decorative arrangements, advertisements, posters, documentaries magazine, and related media. In this context, Bablu Ghosh remarked, “We have been associated with *Moa* for a long time, though this is mainly a sweetshop.

Everyone knows where good *moa* is available. You will see that our name always comes up.” Similarly, Ashok Saharkar of Shri Khishna Mistanno Bhandar stated, “When you taste the *Moa*, you will feel how it melts in your mouth. You will enjoy the aroma of the Khoi (puffed rice) too.” Whereas Arun Das, referring to *Channa Bora*, expressed, “Actually, this sweet has a slightly rich and intense taste.”

These narratives suggest that trades are not merely describing the taste of their products; they are actively shaping and romanticising it. Through such descriptions, they attach meanings to their sweets, construct distinctive perceptions among consumers, and generate a sense of desirability and utility. In doing so, taste becomes not only a sensory experience but also a socially mediated and culturally constructed value.

IV. Narrating Legacy: Crafting Symbolic Value

During the winter season, a visit to Joynagar in search of *Moa* reveals numerous shops selling the sweet along both sides of Ashi Road, a narrow connecting road between Joynagar and Baharu Railway station, running parallel to the railway line. Similarly, along NH-12 near Shaktigarh, approximately 30-40 sweetshops are concentrated at Amrah within a short distance (about 100-150 meters) of Shaktigarh Railway Station. Notably, almost every shop incorporates the word '*Lyancha*' in its name and prominently sells *Lyanchas*. Comparable patterns are visible in Malda town with *Kunsut*, and in Bahrapur with *Channa Bora*. During exploratory visits for basic information, it became apparent that each seller asserts the authenticity of the well-known sweets associated with their respective region. Their narratives regarding heritage and quality are particularly striking.

Regarding the age of his establishment, Bablu Ghosh stated, “This shop is 45 years old. There are older shops here as well, but ours has been the most renowned from the beginning.” Commenting on temporary stalls that also sell *Moa*, he remarked, “No, they do not buy from us. They prepare their own products, but they do not maintain quality. They do it purely for business interests.” Referring to *Moa* production at Baharu, Mahadeb Das claimed, “Our shop is very old, started by my father. This was the first place where it was prepared.” In respect of *Lyancha* at Shaktigarh, Koushik Ghosh explained, “In this area, our shop is the oldest. Even before this road (NH-12) was a single lane, our shop existed here. Those other shops came up it became a double-lane. However, more or less, everyone maintains a similar quality.” Similarly, on *Kunsut* sweets in his shop, Biswajit Saha stated, “The structure of the shop dates back to my father’s time. We follow the same preparation methods. The quality we maintained earlier is still being maintained today.”

These narratives highlight traders’ perceptions not only of their own products but also of competing sellers. The age of a shop is framed as a marker of heritage, while consistent availability and quality are presented as indicators of authenticity. By combining claims of longevity with assertions of superior quality, traders construct an image of mastery and credibility. Through such representations, they seek to establish their prominence in producing regionally celebrated sweets and to differentiate themselves from competitors. In the process, they attract social attention and attach a form of '*symbolic value*' to their products, reinforcing both reputation and market standing.

Conclusion:

The analysis reveals that the social biography of regional sweets in Bengal is crafted through situated narratives embedded in everyday practices. Traders produce and circulate claims regarding origin, claims, subjectivity, and legacy to justify authenticity. Though repeated narration in display, marketing, and everyday exchange, authenticity is normalised, allowing cultural meaning and commodification to operate simultaneously within expanding market structures. The future research demands critical attention on the labour aspects, gender aspects in production and consumers' perception. Comparative studies across different sweet-producing regions may reveal how strategies of legitimisation vary and converge. Even, it will be interesting know how these contributing the global framework of standardisation and recognition.

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