



Sweetness and Love: Cultural Identity, *Rosogolla* (2018) and the 19th Century Bengal

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Abstract

Rosogolla is one of those Bengali words that threaten Google translator. Even *golla* in Bengali does not come close one farthing to the English ‘cypher’ or ‘zero.’ The lost history of this Bengali sweet has been revived beautifully in the 2018 movie *Rosogolla* by Pavel. In this article, my primary concern is the not so sugared history of *Rosogolla* and its unquestionable affability to the sweet-toothed Bengalese. *Rosogolla* may be deemed as a crucial part of the cultural identity in the 19th Bengal. Pavel’s cinematic rendering of the history of *Rosogolla* is a resistance to the emerging continental food culture. This research article proposes to read Pavel’s movie as a cultural text and re-define the history of the king of sweets.

Keywords

Rosogolla, heritage, cultural space, Bengali cuisine, urbanization

'Rosogolla' is one of those Bengali words that challenge the linguistic omniscience of the Google Translate™. Even 'golla' in Bengali does not come close one farthing to the English 'cypher' or 'zero.' In an incorrect translation, the word 'golla' may be rendered 'ball' and therefore, the bad English translation of the word 'Rosogolla' becomes a 'sweet ball' or 'a ball of cottage cheese dipped in sugar syrup.' It is, evidently, a treachery to the cultural nuances of the Indian sweetmeat to call it just a 'sweet ball.' Evidently, the misery of one language to be coloured into another reveals the singularity of one culture over others. The lost history of Rosogolla has been revived beautifully in the 2018 movie *Rosogolla* by Pavel. In this article, my primary concern is the not-so-sugared history of *Rosogolla* and its unquestionable affability to the sweet-toothed Bengalese. Rosogolla may be deemed as a crucial part of the cultural identity in the 19th Bengal. Pavel's cinematic rendering of the history of *Rosogolla* is a resistance to the elitist food culture of the 19th century Bengal. This research article proposes to read Pavel's movie as a cultural text and re-define the history of the king of sweets.

Raymond Williams in his *Keywords : A Vocabulary of Culture and Society* (1976), traces the root of the word 'culture' (from 'cultura,' 'culter,' 'colter,' and 'coulter') back to the fertility cult since the word formerly referred to the natural growth of crops and animals. Eventually, the meaning of the word evolved through anthropological sphere and acquired the meaning 'the process of human development' (Williams 49). Williams's famous utterance culture 'as a whole way of life' challenges the hierarchical dimension of the term and expands its horizons on its original etymological basis German philosopher Herder in his *Outlines of a Philosophy of the History of Man* (1800) called culture 'as the most indeterminate word' (Williams 72). He critiqued the etymological parallelism between culture and human development. For Foucault, culture is a hierarchical organisation of values accessible to everybody but at the same time the occasion of a mechanism of selection and exclusion (O'Farrell 132). Evidently, Foucault locates culture in alignment with power mechanism and puts it in the template of discourse. Stuart Hall's formulations of culture is similar to the Foucauldian paradigms as a space of interpretative struggle. He puts the emphasis on the production of the dominant cultural order by media. By cultural order, he refers to the order Inherited from the Empire (Hall 54).

Williams's definition of the word 'culture' referring to the ways of life is built upon the Marxist template of socialism and points towards an idealist superstructure. In India the word 'culture' bears a special significance. It is used more popularly as a verb to denote sophistication and socio-economic or artistic orientation than as a noun to mean growth (Thapar 09). Romila Thapar in our exceptionally investigative text, *Indian Cultures as Heritage: Contemporary Pasts* (2018) foregrounds the spirit of inequality pervading the Indian society:

Historical records of elite cultures in forms such as texts and monuments, for instance, received large patronage and symbolise the patterns of life of dominant groups. They were and are more readily available as heritage than the objects of the socially lower groups in society survive. This also predisposed people to associate culture as essentially that of the elite. Such distinctions where is implicit in terms such as marga (the cultivated) and the desi (the local) in India (11).

In India, the word ‘culture’ seems to retain its original meaning of cultivation or cultivating the self. Thus put, culture in Indian society is directly linked not just with economic condition but also with the *varnas* one is held from.

The birth of a culture is intimately associated with history and social evolution. However, besides, economy, caste, religion and ethnicity, culture in India is dependent on food also. India, in a broad context is a country of diversity and multi-culturalism. Food in India holds a special place to locate one’s cultural belonging. Montanari has rightly put that:

We only too readily associate the idea of food with the idea of nature. That linkage is, however, ambiguous and fundamentally inaccurate. The dominant values of the food system in human experience are, to be precise, not defined in terms of “naturalness,” but result from and represent cultural processes dependent upon the taming, transformation, and reinterpretation of Nature (xi).

He further adds that food is culture when it is produced, performed and prepared because man seldom eats what he finds in nature (xi). Incidentally, the primary focus of this article is not food proper but a confectionary or more precisely a dessert. Dessert is very peculiarly associated with Indian culture. In one aspect dessert can be differentiated from food. While regular food is cooked as part of the daily chore, dessert is made for special occasions such as festivals and ceremonies. Thus, dessert enjoys a quite privileged position over food. Again, dessert and confectionary are different culturally. Dessert is historically associated with the Eastern countries, while confectionary is with the West. The Romans and the Arabs were famous for their sweetmeats. Sweets were offered to gods in ancient Mesopotamia and till now sweets are offered in great quantity to the Indian gods and goddesses (Kronld 07). Iban Batuta was said to be impressed by the ‘quantity and the cheapness of sugar’ (Kronld 35) when he visited India in the mid-1300s. The narrative of dessert as a cultural marker is written on the template of sweetness and sugar. Sugar was first produced from sugarcane in northern India sometime after the first century CE. According to the Puranic literature sugar was first produced from sugarcane by Ikshvaku. The Valmiki Ramayana mentions sugarcane during the time of Rama, a descendant of Ikshvaku. Panini mentions Gour as a place of gur (jaggery). Incidentally, Gour, Gaud, Gauda was a region in undivided Bengal. Later, historians such as George M. Rolph claimed that the Chinese first introduced sugar to the world in the 8th century BCE but according to further Chinese records, sugar was introduced to China by India in the 7th century BCE¹.

The Bengali people from West Bengal are proverbial for their sweet tooth. Even today, someone from comes to Bengal he or she speaks of *Rosogolla*, *Sandesh* and *Misti Doi* (sweet curd). *Rosogolla* is associated not just with the heritage of Bengal but also with the collective emotion of the Bengalese. The birth of *Rosogolla* is itself legendary. The history of the invention of *Rosogolla* Contains cultural struggle and never ending controversies. Pavel’s adaptation of the cultural history of *Rosogolla* is cinematic and

¹ See <https://www.artofliving.org/in-en/culture/amazing-facts/how-sugar-travelled-around-the-world>

intense though it bypasses the controversies related to the invention of the sweets. According to Historians of Odisha Rasgulla was first invented in Puri with a different name known as *Kheer Mohana* and later it was baptised as 'Rasgulla.' It is claimed that the *Kheer Mohana* was offered to Goddess Laxmi at the Jagannatha Temple in Puri. According to a newspaper article published by Subhasish Mohanty in *The Telegraph* in the year 2012 there is a Puranic story associated with the origination of the *Rasgulla*. Once goddess Lakshmi was angry with Jagannatha because of his Ratha Yatra without her consent. To teach Jagannath a lesson, she locked the Jai Vijay Dwar, one of the temple gates and prevents the convoy of Jagannath from re-entering the sanctum of the temple. It is said that to appease Goddess Laxmi Lord Jagannatha offered her Rasgullas. This ritual is observed till today known as Niladri Bije.² According to another folklore, *Rasgulla* was originated in the village Pahala, a village on the outskirts of Bhubaneswar, Odisha's capital by milkmen.³

But the Bengali food historians namely K.T. Acharya and Chitra Banerji reject the Odiya theory claiming that cottage cheese was not even known before the 17th century. Khoa or skimmed milk was the base used in the sweets.⁴ Haripada Bhowmik claimed that Rasagolla was invented by Nobin Chandra Das of Kolkata. Laxmidhar Pujapanda refused to accept the argument of Bhowmik: 'No one can deny the offering of rasagulla on Niladri Bije that began along with the establishment of the temple about 900 years ago,' he said. 'This is written in the Niladri Mahoday, an age-old scripture. It is true that rasagulla is not mentioned in the *Chhappan Bhog* of Lord Jagannath, but no one can ignore Niladri Bije rituals.'⁵ Michael Krondl in his books on dessert and its awe-inspiring history, *Sweet Invention: A History of Dessert* (2016) wrote: 'That a dessert should elicit war, even if only a war of words, is hardly surprising in a country as obsessed with sweets as India. The matter of Rosogolla's origin is not without dispute' (57). He reminds his readers of the evolution of Rosogolla in Kolkata:

Many Kolkata moira (confectioners) originally hail from Hooghly district, where Chandannagar is located, so could that be the connection? Certainly, the French were partial to fresh curd cheese, but then so were the English; they too occasionally used an acid to coagulate milk as was the common practice in India. Yet no matter its origin, rossogolla likely predates Nobin Chandra Das. But then, even the company's sales brochure hedges its bets, noting, "it is hard to tell whether or not cruder versions of similar sweets existed anywhere at that time. Even if they did, they did not match the quality of Nobin Chandra and having failed to excite the Bengali palate they slipped into oblivion (59).

Pavel's *Rosogolla* (2019) is a tribute to the 'sweet victory' of Bengal over Odisha as the GI tag for 'Banglar Rosogolla' was given to the state in 2019. Though the title of the movie does not mention the word 'Banglar' to particularise the state dessert and the plot of

² See <https://www.telegraphindia.com/states/odisha/lord-placates-wife-with-sweet-delight/cid/404217#.UytFEVcqQ0M>

³ See <https://indianexpress.com/article/lifestyle/food-wine/the-food-story-how-indias-favourite-sweet-dish-rosugulla-was-born/>

⁴ <https://web.archive.org/web/20151009143538/http://www.kashmirobsrver.net/news/opinion/who-deserves-credit-rasgulla-bengalis-odiyasor-portuguese>

⁵ http://www.telegraphindia.com/1100726/jsp/orissa/story_12725909.jsp

the movie is quite predictable, the impression the movie produces is as sweet as Rosogolla itself. In the opening scene of the movie, the fate of little Nobin to be a famous moyra is prefixed as a *sufi* bard blessed him for his offering of a lump of earth as *monda* (a sweetmeat produced from *chenna* or cottage cheese and sugar). It should be noted that the title ‘Das’ in pre-independence Bengal was deemed to be superior to the Moira caste. After a family scuffle with his uncle, Nobin decided to work at a sweetmeat stall and very soon was employed by a famous sweetmeat seller, popularly known Kalibabu. From the very beginning Nobin was given to frequent experimenting with new recipes and for his experimental nature and faced opposition many times. Inspired by his love interest who later became his wife, Nobin started experimenting with sweets. After a series of failures, he came in contact with some Dutch cook and learnt to stabilise cottage cheese or *chenna* by curdling it with lactic acid so that it might not get squandered in sugar syrup. Powell retells is the story of the invention of Rasgulla in a romantic and emotional way as the movie ends with a highly dramatic scene of reconciliation in which Naveen Nobin went to bring his wife Khirodmoni back with the container full of a new sweet *Baikunthabhog*. Khirodmoni was awestruck to taste the new sweet and asked her husband how he made it. He replied ‘with love.’

Pavel’s narrative of the invention of Rosogolla does not incorporate regional controversies regarding the sweetmeat. However, it focuses instead on the cultural battle fought by a poor, lone Bengali. He highly fictionalises that Nobin invented Rosogolla to please his wife who had demanded during their days of courtship to make a sweetmeat that will be white, juicy and soft. Nobin’s success story may be aligned with the intellectual, scientific and philosophical prosperity during the Bengali Renaissance. The invention of Rosogolla was a revolution in the world of confectionary. Even today, Rosogolla is considered to be the main dessert during a ceremony or festival. *Sandesh* (a dessert made from Chana by curdling it and separating the whey from it and sugar) or *Chanar Payesh* (Kheer) holds a secondary status to the king of sweets. He is rightly called the ‘Columbus of Calcutta’.

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