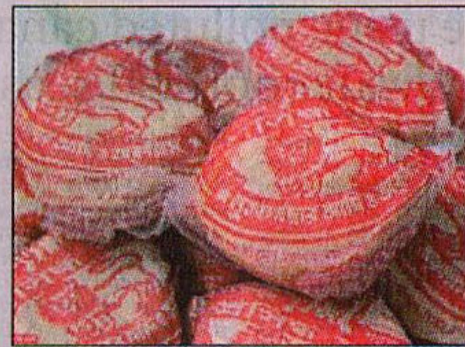


Monda: A century old traditional sweet of Muktagachha



whenever they went to meet the kings out of Muktagachha and the British rulers they took the sweetmeat as gift.

Locals said after the fall of Nawab Siraj-Ud-Douhah, Gopal Pal's grandfather Shibrum Pal and father Ramram Pal left Murshidabad for Rajshahi to save life and later settled in Muktagachha. Gopal Pal set up the shop in 1824 with the help of the Zamindars. The Pal family has been in this business for last 180 years.

During the Liberation War in 1971, members of the Pal family left their homes, business and took shelter in India as refugee for nine months when their houses were looted and burnt and the Monda shop was partly damaged. Local blanket trader Rahman Dhunkar, also an influential leader of the area, saved the shop during the bloody war.

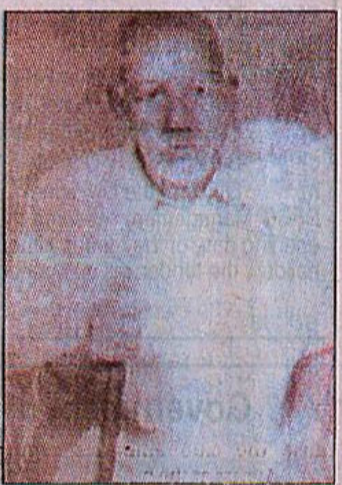
One Bholu Pagla, a date juice seller, saved the wooden sculpture of Gopal Pal by hiding it in a jungle adjacent to the shop. When the Pal family returned home after the war, Rahman Dhunkar and Bholu Pagla handed over the shop and the sculpture to Pal family and they resumed their business in the independent Bangladesh.

Whenever cultural, social and political elite of this subcontinent came to Muktagachha they were served Monda. They include world famous Sitar artist Ustad

Alauddin Khan, physician Dr Bidhan Chandra Roy (who later became West Bengal minister), Netaji Shubhash Chandra Basu, Shashi Kanta Acharya, son of Maharaja Surya Kanta was also fond of Monda. Ramendra said Shashi Kanta sent Monda to Joseph Stalin in former Soviet Union as gift. Pleased with the taste, Stalin sent an appreciation letter to him.

Former president of Pakistan Ayub Khan was also fond of Monda. Monayem Khan, governor of former East Pakistan used to send the sweetmeat to him. "All big politicians and leaders used to love Monda. They came to our shop several times. Maulana Bhasani once took Monda for Chinese leader Mao Tse Tung who also liked it," said Ramendra.

The present owner said there is a myth behind the first preparation of Monda. His grand grandfather Gopal Pal was very much devoted to the God. He got the instruction of cooking Monda in his dreams. A hermit came to his dream for



Kedar Nath Pal, the third generation of Pal family

consecutive nights and ordered to prepare Monda. Following the order, Gopal Pal cooked the sweetmeat one day. The hermit then came physically to Gopal Pal's house, touched the burner and gave blessings saying that one day the sweetmeat will become world famous.

"At several nights I also heard as if somebody wearing kharam (wooden shoes) entered the shop through the backdoor and departed through the front door after staying for some time at the storeroom and the factory," said Ramendra Nath Pal.

"I tried to know the source of the sound several times with flashlight but could not see anybody or anything. When I asked my grandfather if he knew about the footsteps, he just smiled. He told me not to be afraid as he had also heard the sound. We believe as we are the predecessor of Gopal Pal we will continue to hear the sound," he said.

Now five brothers -- Ramendra Nath Pal, Rabindra Nath Pal, Rathindra Nath Pal, Shishir Kumar Pal and Mihir Kumar Pal -- run the Monda business. While we were leaving the shop, a little boy, around seven-year-old, said he comes to the shop with his father Ramendra everyday and will be involved in the business if needed. "Monda is not a business. It has become a heritage of the country. We have to continue the shop to keep Monda culture on," Ramendra said.

Story: MIZANUR KHAN
Photo: SYED ZAKIR HOSSAIN

We were planning to visit the Maharaja Suryakanta Bari at Muktagachha in Mymensingh for long but could not manage as both of us were so busy. Though the visit to the magnificent house built in the eighteenth century was part of our professional work, we had to change the visit schedule again and again because of major political events taking place in the capital. Finally, we made it and one day in a fine morning we set off to the ancient city from Kamalapur Railway station.

After a three-hour pleasant journey we reached the old station in Mymensingh where Aminul Islam, our local correspondent was

waiting to receive us. He was our guide too. First we took a rickshaw and then hired a three-wheeler. We found the air-polluting vehicle, which was ousted from the capital four years ago, was no more a small three-seated baby-taxi. It was turned into a public transport that carries 10 passengers at the back and another four at the front seat apart from the driver.

Muktagachha is around 16 kilometer west of Mymensingh town. It is said that sometime in the early 18th century, a local blacksmith named Muktagachha had presented a gachha (brass) or a lamp to the eldest son of the region's ruler as a mark of loyalty. In recognition of the gift, the rulers named

the locality as Muktagachha.

Zakir bhai was busy taking pictures for two hours at the century old palace, now mostly in ruins. The 'taxi' was waiting outside. While coming back from the place, we noticed a small colourful building on the roadside. We saw the name 'Gopal Paler Proshiddha Monda' written on the top of the entrance that forced us to stop.

Oh Monda! I shouted: This is the delicious and famous sweetmeat of Muktagachha! We jumped and entered the shop to have the taste of the sweetmeat sitting at the country's only one Monda shop.

The taste of Monda has been known to us from our childhood. I knew that the sweetmeat is from

Muktagachha, as it is popularly known as 'Muktagachhar Monda' (sweet of Muktagachha). But I never imagined that I would have the privilege of relishing Monda sitting at the home of the traditional sweetmeat.

It is true that the Rajbari (Maharaja's palace) draws visitors to Muktagachha, but the town is best known for this sweet. And that is the lone shop, which makes the best quality Monda, and it has no branch anywhere in the country, even not in the capital.

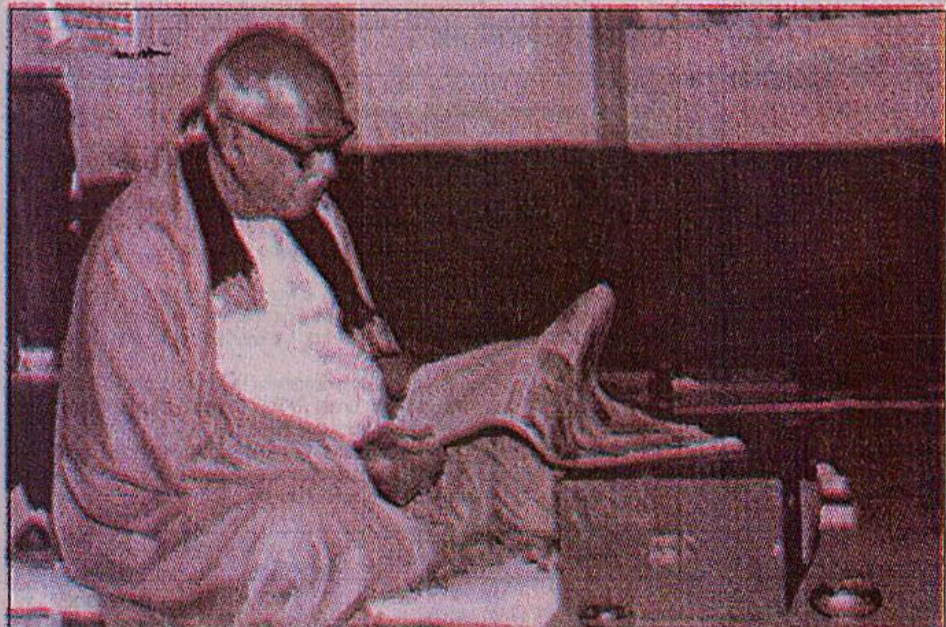
The shop, with a lion's motif over the door, looks more like a place for relaxing than a sweet shop. Inside the shop there are some benches and chairs. We saw a

few people were having the taste of the sweetmeat. A big wood sculpture of Ram Gopal Pal (1799-1907), founder of the shop, has been kept inside a glass-made showcase. Swarup Sutradhar, a carpenter of the palace, made the sculpture 102 years ago.

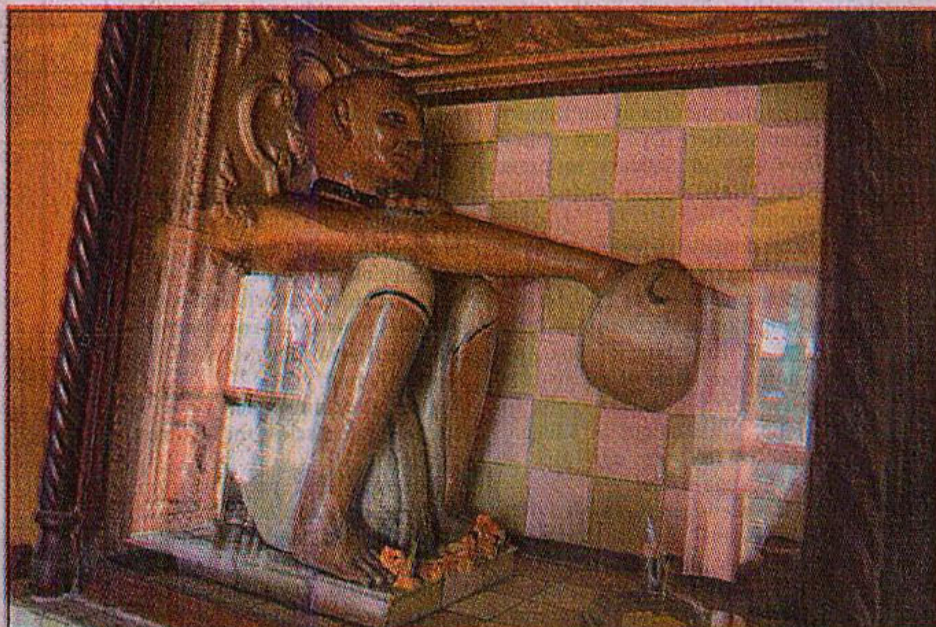
On the right hand side there was a man sitting across a big table. First I thought he is the cashier of the shop. No, he is Ramendra Nath Pal, the owner of the shop and fifth generation of Gopal Pal family. His ancestors Radhanath Pal, Kedar Nath Pal and Darikanath Pal continued the business after the death of Gopal Pal and now it is Ramendra's turn to carry the century old tradition.

Zamindars in Muktagachha were very much cultural minded. They used to invite elite guests and entertain them with Monda. It is learnt that Ram Gopal Pal first cooked Monda in 1824 and presented to Maharaja Babu Surya Kanta Acharya. The sweetmeat was so delicious that they were very much pleased with its unprecedented taste and it became an indispensable breakfast item at the Zamindarbari. Officials and workers of their estate were also served Monda as afternoon snacks. The Zamindar family also used to offer Monda for the God and Goddess during religious festivals like Puja.

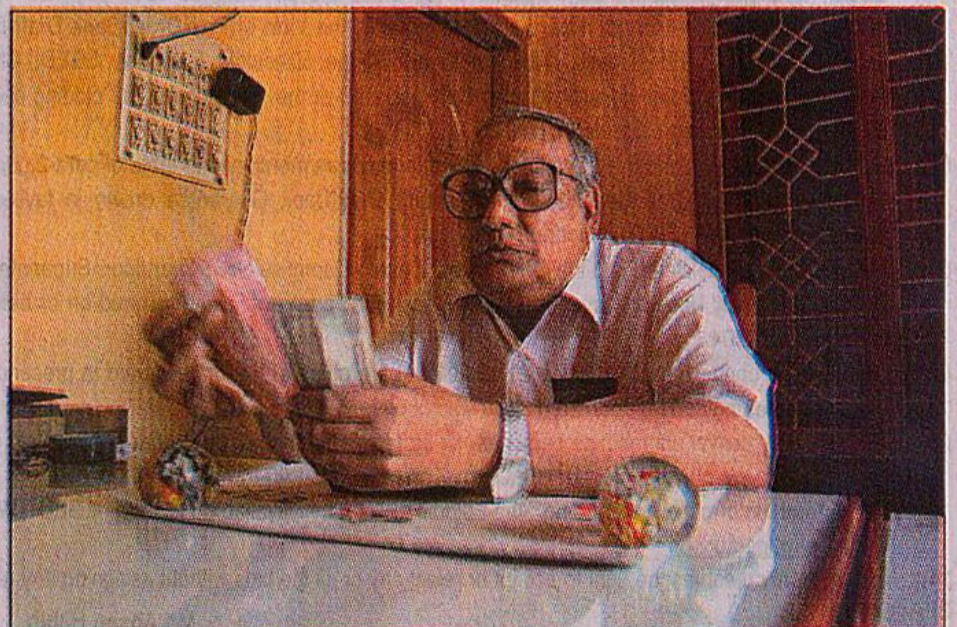
The Zamindars considered Monda as a symbol of pride and



Darikanath Pal, fourth generation of Pal family



Wooden sculpture of Gopal Pal, founder of the shop



Ramendra Pal, present owner and the fifth generation of Pal family