

FOUR HUNDRED YEARS OF DHAKA

Sweets still a claim of fame

SHAHNAZ PARVEEN

Idris Ali never returns home from work without a pack of sweets. If it is *amirti* today, it would be *balushahi* or *maoar laddu* the next day.

"If I can afford, then I would like to have sweets with almost every meal or even between meals. They are simply irresistible," said Ali from Nazimuddin Road in old Dhaka.

"My children inherited the habit. I cannot go back home without a packet in my hand even if it is half a kilogram," he added.

As Dhaka celebrates its 400 years, the sweets in the old part of city are still at the height of fame for their excellence.

While Dhakaiyas are great lovers of *biryani* and deep fried meat based cookies, their second love, no doubt, is the luscious sweets.

According to Hashem Sufi, director, Dhaka History Research Centre, this love for sweetsmeats can be traced a long way back in the history.

"It is one luxury that people gladly become used to. Any occasion in this continent requires the presence of sweet flavours," he said.

Traditionally, Bangalees distribute sweets among neighbours and relatives on a variety of occasions such as births, engagements, weddings, success in examinations etc. A sweet flavour after a gala dinner is considered as the perfect ending.

"Indigenous sweets of Dhaka are very much *chhana* (cottage cheese) based and it is dripped with *sheera* (sugar syrup). This is what makes Dhakai sweets different from others," Sufi said.

Chhanar bhog, *monda*, *kachagollah* and *chhanar shondesh* are probably the oldest form of sweets made with cottage cheese, he observed.

The dry sweets that we see today arrived in Dhaka from various parts of India. In the beginning it was known as the Hindustani sweets. These sweets were made with *maoa* (slowly thickened milk in wood stove). However, they secured a place among Dhakai sweets as the dry sweets last longer than syrupy sweets.

Pure milk is the main ingredient of both dry and syrupy sweets.

According to the book 'Dhaka Pachas Baras Pahle' (1945) by Hekim Habibur Rahman, and translated by Hashem Sufi, traditionally Dhakai sweets are those made in households including *payesh*, *firni*, curds, reference of which can be found in ancient writings.

Historians consider Hekim's book as a very important testament of socio-cultural background of the late 18th to early 20th century. Hekim Habibur Rahman was a respected physician, literary guru, historian and researcher of his time. He grew up in Dhaka's Chhoto Katra area.

In his book originally written in Urdu, Hekim describes, sweetsmeats were prepared at

home when a VIP guest came. Aristocrats had personal 'moira' or 'thakur' who used to prepare sweets for them and during special occasions.

Meanwhile, *pitha* (traditional homemade cake) was the sweets of the commoners. Main ingredients of *pitha* were powdered rice, coconut, *gur* (molasses) made with date palm and sugar-cane syrup available in plentiful anywhere in Bengal.

Sweets were usually sold by the *feriwalas* (street vendors) until 1880s and people used to call them Halwaiwala, Sufi commented. Then came the culture of selling sweets in shops.

During Hakim's day *morobba* and *halwa* made with *nanj*, *turanj*, orange, green papaya and even ginger was popular. Also popular was *nukkal*, *shakkar pera*, *balushahi*, *halwai mohan*. Except for *balushahi* none of these names exists now.

"During my childhood in 1950s people used to crave for *nikhuti*, *aamfaak*, *maoar laddu*, *luchi bhog* and many more

sweets," said Sufi.

Throughout hundreds of years sweet delights have gone through waves of many innovations and processing by the master sweet-makers. Many items with tempting flavours were created by them all over Bangladesh.

The art of making this delightful dessert is being passed down generation by generation. Some of the sweet delicacies made by them are still produced by their heirs.

Roshogolla, *khirmohon*, *lalmohon*, *chomchom*, *pantoa*, *kalojam*, *lady kini*, *amrito* or *amirti* and *pranahara* are some of the tooth-aching names. Lady kini is the distorted name of a sweet that was favoured by Lady Canning, the wife of Lord Canning.

Every single sweet has a particular recipe, preparation style, shape, colour, taste and aroma. *Roshogolla*, the soft and succulent ball of *chhana* cooked and soaked in sugar syrup is still considered as the undisputed king of sweets.

According to Sufi, sweetsmeat

industry has flourished because of its close link with social and religious ceremonies. It is an ancient custom of the Hindus to distribute sweets in *pujas*. Sweets are also distributed at the end of *milad* or other Muslim religious events.

"Establishment of sugar mill played a major role in making sweets affordable to the mass," Sufi mentioned.

The first sugar mill of Dhaka was established in 1840. Before that *gur* and homemade sugar were used in sweets, making the process physically excruciating and expensive. Machine made sugar became gradually cheap bringing down the cost of sweets.

Today competition in sweet market is intense. Changing tastes have helped create many new flavours. Various moulds are used to give attractive designs and shapes to sweets. To attract customers today's sweet shops use colourful packing and assortments of toppings. The sweet industry has grown not only within the country but also spread abroad.

However, many renowned flavours have lost their originality. Because the use of artificial elements, adulterated ingredients and powdered milk, the taste is also changing.

"I have never seen some of the sweets that my grandfather used to talk about. Today different names are often used for same sweet in many stores," said Idris Ali.

"Some of the sweets do not taste as good as they used to before. Sweets are not that soft anymore. Often some sweets taste like lump of flour," he added.

Yet sweet remains an integral part of Dhakai lifestyle and gastronomic heritage.

Khirs toast, *khirmohon*, *malai chop*, *rosh malai*, *raabri*, *motichur laddu*, *maoa laddu*, *malai kari*, *langcha*, *malai shorai*, *rosh cha*, *kaacha chhana*, *jafran vog*, *cream jaam*, *irani bhog*, *shor toast*, *shondesh*, *shar mohan*, *shar roll*, *khirs shagar*, these are some of the names of succulent sweetsmeats of current Dhaka offered by hot new outlets of the town.



Rows of sweetmeat shops is a common feature in most alleys in old Dhaka. The picture was taken from Chawk Circular Road.

Desa out, DPDC in and let's hope for the best

RIZANUZZAMAN LASKAR

When the few hundreds of thousands of subscribers to the city's electricity supply authority received their electricity bill for the month of June, they may have noticed some major differences on the invoice.

Of course, the title in the bill now reads Dhaka Power Division Company (DPDC) Ltd instead of Dhaka Electric Supply Authority's (Desa). But more importantly, some subscribers may have found that their electricity charges are notably different from those of the earlier months.

Masuda Haider, a Badda resident received an electricity bill of over Tk 4,000 for the month of June. And she had paid only Tk 900 the month before.

"We were stunned to see the amount. I could not figure out how the bill shot up that much while our electricity consumption was as before," said Masuda Haider, "never ever in all these years of living in the city we paid that much money for electricity."

Another electricity bill sent to a household in Bashabo had a payable of Tk 5,000 - over five times the bill the residents are used to pay.

"I am still quite confused. I paid around Tk 800 for electricity bill only last month," said Nasima Khanam, recipient of the bill, "by no way our electricity usage made a jump in just one month. So why this radical increase?" she said.

Mohammad Al Amin, an electrical engineer and trader of electrical accessories at Goran has an answer to Nasima's question.

"Some unscrupulous Desa officials used to alter the actual electricity consumption and issue bills showing an amount that is lower than the original charge. But they actually kept

tab of the unpaid amounts of bills," said Mohammad Al Amin. "Then, after some months they handed a hefty amount of 'additional' bill to the subscriber," he said.

The unscrupulous officials would then make a "deal" with that subscriber and 'help him reduce' the amount and make the bill payable in exchange for a kickback, he explained.

"But now that Desa is privatised, it has replaced a large section of its workers and field level officers. So, new people have replaced the officials who played that trick to squeeze money out of subscribers. And now the subscribers are getting their actual electricity bills," he added.

While Amin's explanation is based on his own experience from dealing with Desa people, DPDC (formerly Desa) officials admit there had been some ethical problems within the former Desa. However, with DPDC, most of those problems have been fixed.

"I am not certain whether this is how some officials at Desa used to collect bribes. But unscrupulous conducts were one of the major issues and DPDC was formed to address these problems," said an official at Dhaka Power Division Company (DPDC) Ltd.

An official at the complaints section of DPDC's Dhanmondi zone office told this correspondent that subscribers should always weigh the bill against their electricity consumption. They should read meters to make sure that there are no discrepancies in the bill.

"I sincerely believe there is no of unscrupulousness in DPDC now as the employees are now more perceptive about their duties and responsibilities. They are really concerned how to offer the best services to our customers," he said adding that unethical conducts of employ-

ees will be dealt with severely. However, city dwellers have other things to say.

A subscriber from Badda complained to DPDC officials that he is being charged higher than what the meter shows. The subscriber then hired an electrician to look for faults in the meter to prove his point to DPDC officials that he was, indeed overcharged.

Later a DPDC official went to the household to verify the complaint. After finding out that the meter was tampered, he was furious - not because the reading of the meter was manipulated, but because the subscriber decided to hire an electrician to do the job and not that DPDC official.

He demanded a bribe of Tk 1,000 to let the incident slide. A spokesperson from the Madartek zone of DPDC told this correspondent that subscribers should immediately report their local office about any unscrupulous conducts by DPDC officials.

"Subscribers are always welcome to share their complaints, questions or comments with us," he said, "we have already taken actions against a number of employees who demanded bribes from subscribers. We just suspended two such officers only last week," he added.

After Desa was officially dissolved, Dhaka Power Division Company (DPDC) Ltd has started its operations to supply power to the areas formerly covered by Desa.

"It has been barely a month since DPDC started its journey, therefore there are still some loose ends in the project. We still lack some logistic supports and manpower to offer quality service to our subscribers," said a spokesperson for DPDC.

However, DPDC's biggest concern now is to lower its systems loss and earn profits, he said.



Wide varieties of mouth-watering sweets inside a sweetmeat shop in old Dhaka.

There is much debate about the oldest sweet shop in Dhaka.

According to Hekim's book two halwaiwalas, Mathar Baksh and Alauddin, came to Dhaka from Lucknow, India during 1885-90. Alauddin opened his sweetmeat shop in Chawkbazar in 1896. The first Alauddin outlet was a small bamboo-hut store named Alauddin Halwai.

Some of the other oldest sweet

Tale of oldest Dhakai halwaiwalas

shops are Kalachand Gandha Banik and Sitaram Mistanno Bhandar of Islampur, Latmiar Islamia Mistanno Bhandar in Nayabazar, Maranchand Gosh and Co in Nababpur Road. All of these shops opened before 1945.

Amidst the frenzied atmosphere of

today's Chawkbazar still stands the modest-looking sweet shop, Alauddin Sweetmeat Ltd, the oldest dry sweet shop in Dhaka. There were sweet shops before Alauddin but they could not sustain.

In the maze of Rothkhola, Nababpur, the Adi Maranchand Gosh

and Co stands lonely bearing clear marks of dejection while the others like Kalachand, Sitaram, Latmia disappeared from the scene long ago. Many karigars moved to Kolkata during Liberation War shutting their business and ending the journey of scores of sweet flavours in Dhaka.

TWO ROADS IN BAD SHAPE

The road at 47/3/D Saatnagar, Jigatola, left, is flooded with dirty water as its sewerage line is blocked with garbage. Besides, tannery effluents from nearby Hazaribagh mix with the water to make it stinky. Most pedestrians have to hire a rickshaw or a rickshaw-van to avoid dirt. In spite of informing the authorities several times no measures have been taken to fix the situation till now. The picture at right shows a road lies just 100 metres away from ward commissioner's office at Ward 27 near the busy Madartek Bazar. The road is riddled with stray pieces or uneven bricks for months. But the authorities turn a blind eye to the sufferings of the people.

