



# 'THE KING OF SWEETS'

MIRZA SHAKIL

Porabari Chamcham, the "king of sweets" as it is called by its lovers. One's mouth is certain to water by the very name of it or the thought of it. I mean if one knows what it is. For those who do not know: It is a unique sweetmeat from Tangail's Porabari. It is burned brick-coloured outside and light pink inside. Its flavour? Matchless. And its taste? Only if words could explain everything. And my mouth is already watering.

The history of this still uncontested sweetmeat goes back to the end of the 19th century when Dasharath Gour, coming from Bihar (now in India), started making them. He used pure cow milk and the sweet water of the Dhaleshwari river, among other ingredients.

No one knows for sure exactly when

Dasharath started the business in Porabari, but those involved in the trade today say it would be around the end of the 19th century. His produce won the hearts and minds of sweet lovers within a very short time.

But of all other places, why did Dasharath settle in Porabari? About five kilometers west of Tangail town and around 100 kilometers west of Dhaka, Porabari was a small but busy river port in the British era where goods-laden steamers and launches used to anchor almost every day. This means it was a business hub for a lot of people from home as well as from Kolkata.

Following in the footsteps of Dasharath, about 200 families in Porabari later took up the craft and eventually entered the business. Within a few years, Porabari had about 40 Chamcham shops at Porabari Bazar.

Later even, Narayan Chandra Gour

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alias Bangalee Halui, Rajaram Gour, Modon Lal Gour, Shib Sankar and Kushai Dev of Porabari took its quality to new heights through their masterly touches.

In the beginning of 1940, two more Haluis -- Ramendra Thakur and Tirthobasi Thakur -- came to Tangail from Assam and started making and selling Chamcham at Panchani Bazar. Subsequently, Panchani Bazar came to be known as Mishtypotti. Although these Chamchams are not Porabarir Chamcham, they are sold as such. However, their tastes do not vary much.

Many historical names are associated with Porabarir Chamcham. Those who admired it include Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, Sher-e-Bangla AK Fazlul Haque, Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, PC Sarkar, Nawab Ali Chowdhury, RP Saha, Wajed Ali Khan Panni, Principal Ibrahim Khan

and Promoth Nath Chowdhury.

Legend has it that Bhashani used to come to Porabari often and used to have chats with his followers at the shop of Modon Lal Gour.

Things change over time. The booming business started to fall around 1960, partly because launches and other vessels stopped anchoring at Porabari as many shoals had developed in the Dhaleshwari and partly because of the unstable political condition in the Indian subcontinent, namely the India-Pakistan tension.

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Gonesh Chandra Gour, owner of

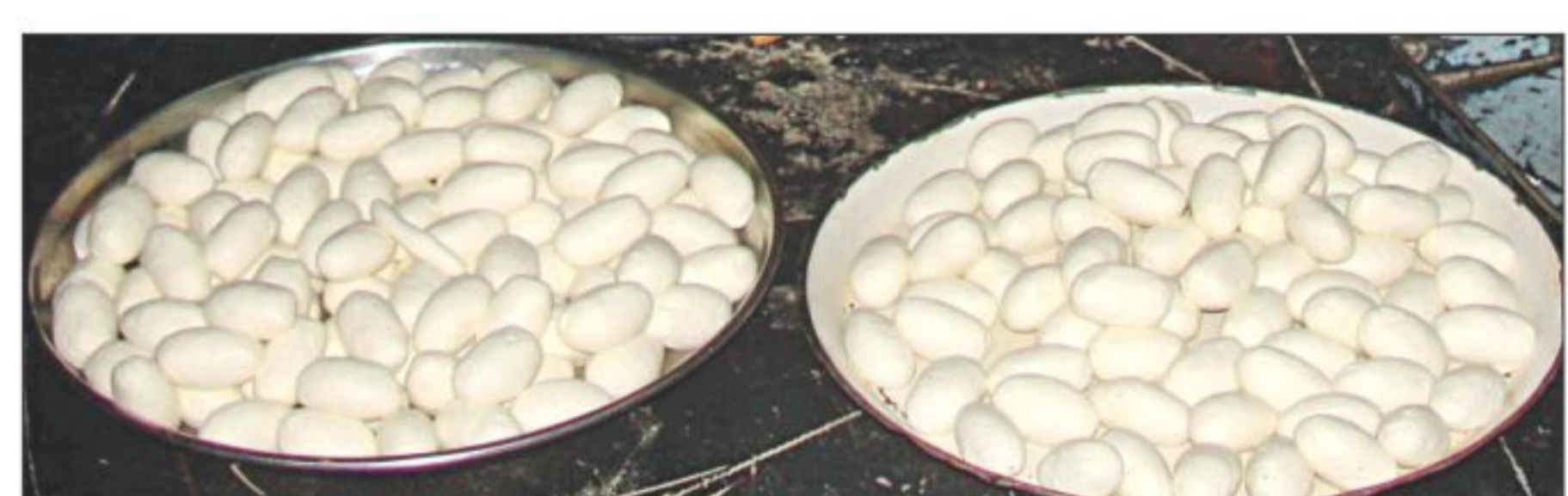
Adi Porabari Mishtanno Bhandar in Porabari, says he is still holding on to the family business despite many challenges, including declining profit due to the price hike of essentials. Also, some dishonest traders around the country are faking this special item to make brisk business.

Its demand increases during festivals like Eid, Puja and Pahela Baishakh. Many people also send or take them abroad for their friends and family.

This is because of all the varieties, Porabarir Chamcham enjoys extraordinary popularity due to its unfailing quality and taste. Many have tried to make something similar to it for many years. Some have even been able to do so, but only partly.

Why? "Actually the mystery lies in the milk and the water of Tangail," says Swapan Ghosh, president of sweet traders association in the district.

*Veteran sweetmeat trader Gour Ghosh, 75, said in the 40's milk was 50 paisa a kg and they could sell a kg of Chamcham for Tk 1 and still have a 40 percent profit margin. But now, a 10 or 15 percent profit is hard to make selling a kg of Chamcham for Tk 180-200.*



## The falling BUSINESS

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Once there were around 40 families in Porabari union in Tangail making the Chamcham that received nationwide fame. But now only about 10 families are in the business due to high production cost, poor profit margin and the fact that almost every Chamcham produced in Tangail is claimed to be from Porabari.

The Haluis, traditional name for the sweetmeat makers, of Porabari have been hit hard with high prices of ingredients for their sweetmeats. Prices of sugar, milk and fuel have skyrocketed over the years but the prices of Chamcham have not increased much in comparison.

The haluis of Porabari are very particular about the quality of milk they use for the Chamchams, which pushes up their production cost as well.

Halui Dinesh Chandra Gour, 40, owner of Adi Porabari Mistanno Bhandar of Porabari said his maternal grandfather Narayan Chandra Gour, also known as Bangalee Halui, had learned the craft from Dashrath Gour, the pioneer of Porabari Chamcham industry.

"My father was taught by my grandfather and my elder brother Gonesh and I learnt from our father," Dinesh said, adding, "Now we run one of the three Chamcham shops in Porabari."

Dinesh's mother Reshma Rani, 75, talked about the heydays of the industry. She said the then zamindars, landlords of the British era, loved the Chamchams produced in Porabari and they considered it a delicacy.

They used Chamchams to entertain their guests from home and abroad, she said, adding that they used to receive a lot of tips from the happy zamindars.

"But now that's only history," said Halui Sankar Chandra Gour, 80, of Porabari. The senior most living Halui said now they want to quit the profession but could not do so as they know nothing but to make Chamchams.

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Montu Chandra Gour, 45, of Porabari said, "People buy Chamchams from the shops in Tangail town at high prices thinking them to be from Porabari, which in most cases are not from Porabari, five kilometres from the town."

An employee of a renowned sweetmeat shop in Tangail town claimed that the price of their Chamcham is a little higher than those of Porabari since its quality is better and the value added tax has to be included.

Several hundred Haluis in Tangail district also produce various mouth-watering sweetmeats like Rosogolla, Sondesh, Panitola, Amriti, Rosmalai, Malai Kari, Doi etc.

Amid the stiff competition, poor profit margin, high price of ingredients, the Haluis of Porabari struggle to survive in the trade they have been in for generations.

PHOTO: MIRZA SHAKIL