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The sweet side of NARAYANGANJ

From ghee laddus to chamcham, old confectioneries tell a sweeter story of the industrial city



◀ A variant of laddu

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Mention Narayanganj, and the conversation often turns to garment factories, historic Panam City and the fading glory of jute mills. Then come its familiar troubles: industrial and environmental pollution, urban sprawl and the Shitalakkhya gasping for breath.

Less often discussed is a sweeter part of its identity: the old confectioneries and the delicacies that have kept customers returning for generations.

Some of these businesses trace their beginnings back more than a century. Their heritage survives not simply in family recollections, but in kitchens where milk bubbles in cauldrons, chhana is kneaded by hand and ghee lends its aroma to freshly made laddus.

To find this Narayanganj, begin in Kalir Bazar.

At Adi Adarsha Mishtanna Bhandar,



Roshogolla

an enormous cauldron of milk sits over a blazing furnace. Nearby, fresh chhana is being prepared, kalojam is frying in a pan and steam rises from freshly made chamcham.

In a corner, a confectioner fries burinda, tiny pieces made from flour and sugar, in ghee. Once they cool slightly, another worker rubs ghee onto his palms and presses handfuls into round laddus. The roughly 400-square-foot kitchen is filled with the aroma of milk, chhana and ghee.

Other sweets are immersed in sugar syrup while another batch of ghee-fried laddus is prepared. A worker carries a tray of freshly made kachagolla towards customers waiting for their orders.



Special raisin-topped ghee laddus at Adi Adarsha Mishtanna Bhandar



Chhanar sandesh

During the Puja season, the selection includes a special raisin-topped laddu, praised by customer Mohammad Ikhtiar Uddin. Kachagolla and pera sandesh are favourites of Arun Biswas, whose family has bought sweets here for Lakshmi Puja for three generations.

Fourth-generation owner Moloy Kumar Modak traces the business to around 1870-72, when his great-grandfather began selling sweets near what is now № 2 Railgate. His grandfather, Madhusudan Modak, later established the shop permanently in Kalir Bazar, close to the railway station and river port.

Madhusudan brought ghee from Kolkata, used milk from the family's own cows and prepared sweets himself to maintain their distinctive taste, Moloy recalled.

Moloy now oversees the original establishment and another outlet at Santwana Market in Chashara, continuing the trade his father, Arun Kumar Modak, carried on until his death in 2016.

"When I hear that people travel from Chandpur, Dhaka, Savar and other distant places just to buy our sweets, I feel proud. I am trying to maintain the reputation my family has built," he said.

For Sharfuddin Sabuj, a customer for nearly 55 years, the sweets are recognisable even before the first bite.

"You can tell these sweets are from Adi Adarsha Mishtanna Bhandar just by the smell and taste," he said.

Sharfuddin remembers buying batasha and lal khoi during childhood market visits with his father. Some old favourites have since disappeared from the regular selection, but his family still buys sweets here for special occasions. A son living in Japan occasionally asks for kadma and jilapi, which Sharfuddin sends whenever possible.

About half a kilometre away, near № 1 Railgate, a short walk from Bose Cabin leads to Mistimukh, another longstanding name in the city's confectionery trade.

Founded around 130 years ago by Keshab Chandra Ghosh in Bottola, the shop became known for its doi and sweets. Keshab also practised homoeopathy, establishing the confectionery to preserve his family's tradition.



Pera Sandesh

The menu now offers both familiar flavours and plenty to explore. Roshogolla, chamcham, kalojam and kachagolla share space with shahi chamcham, pora chamcham, kheer chop, lyangcha, roshmonjuri and roshmalai.

For those drawn to date-palm jaggery, there are gurer roshogolla, gurer sandesh and gurer barfi.

Nearby, New Roshraj Mistimukh offers chhanar amriti, gajorer barfi, chocolate round and ilish peti. Its laddus range from ghee and moti to mawa, semai and kaju badam. Other sweets take the shapes of fish, butterflies and conch shells, named chhanar machh, chhanar projapoti and chhanar shankha.

The variety reflects a business that has adapted without leaving its older recipes behind.

Road expansion during HM Ershad's rule forced the family to move the original shop from across the road, near the railway line. Later, Keshab's son Trinath Ghosh established Roshraj Mistimukh in 2000.

At the older establishment, customers still gather around a narrow counter for familiar favourites.

"Our sweets are made from pure cow's milk, just as they were in my father's and grandfather's time," said Asim Ghosh, Mistimukh's fourth-generation owner.

"My father always told us that making sweets was our family's profession. We had to preserve the taste that customers expected, rather than think only about profit," he added.

Seating is limited at the old shop, although customers can sit at the newer outlet, cashier Alok Debnath said.

For tea seller Abdul Molla, the kalojam remains the attraction. "I have never found kalojam quite like theirs anywhere else," he said.

Newer creations have their admirers too. Debnath Basu, a customer since childhood, now brings his two-and-a-half-year-old granddaughter, Debasmita, for chocolate sweets.

Further along, in Ukilpara, a particular laddu has helped preserve its maker's name.

Jagatbondhu Mishtanna Bhandar is still known to many as Sonai Ghosh's sweet shop, after its founder, Sanatan Ghosh. Established around 1930, it began with paratha, vegetable bhaji and other breakfast items before expanding into confectionery.

The ghee laddus became known as Sonai Ghosh's laddus. Decades after his death, customers still seek them out, particularly during Chaitra Sankranti and Durga Puja.

Today, the selection extends to roshogolla, chamcham, kalojam, lalmohon, kheer chop, chhanar amriti, malai chop and different varieties of sandesh. Sweet doi and sour doi are also popular, while the shop has begun selling ghee made from cow's milk, said Haradhan Matabar, who has worked at the establishment for nearly half a century.

Keeping the counters supplied requires steady work. Chief confectioner Dipak Adhikari said around 20-25 maunds of chhana are prepared daily for making sweets.

"The sweets prepared at night are sold during the day. Orders for the following day are often placed the night before," he said.

"Some customers want ghee laddus, others ask for sandwich sweets or chocolate jam. But the older varieties are still more popular than the new ones."

Among those seeking the traditional sweets is Marufa Begum, who travels from Nimtoli in Old Dhaka for lalmohan and chamcham. After earlier visits left her without lalmohan, she called ahead and arrived around noon.

"I don't usually find sweets with this taste anywhere else. Whenever I really feel like eating sweets, I come here. I eat some and take more home," she said.

The family has opened a newer outlet with a wider selection, but the original shop still records higher sales, said owner Sukhdev Ghosh, Sanatan's son.

"Customers think the sweets at the old shop taste different, although we prepare them in the same kitchen," he said.

Preserving that taste is not without difficulty. Finding raw ingredients, especially pure milk, is a challenge, Sukhdev said.

"We are trying hard to maintain the same taste and keep prices affordable for customers from all walks of life," he said.

For Sukhdev, the standard remains the one set by his father. "My father's dream was to make sweets better than those sold elsewhere. We are trying to maintain that quality and keep the business going."

Back in the kitchen, Dipak continues kneading fresh chhana as fellow confectioners prepare ledikeni, malai chop, malai peshti, haribhanga and lyangcha. The aroma of ghee and fresh sweets drifts into the streets of Ukilpara.

These establishments have changed with Narayanganj. New outlets have opened, menus have grown and chocolate sweets have found a place beside traditional recipes. Yet their appeal still rests on flavours that customers return to, sometimes from far beyond the city.

Away from the familiar accounts of factories, pollution and urban pressures, this is another Narayanganj: a city whose heritage is also found in its sweet shops, and in what their confectioners make each day.



Lyangcha



Malai chop



Chhanar amriti at New Roshraj Mistimukh



Chamcham

PHOTOS: STAR