The row of date palms stood like sentinels next to an empty field readied for the sowing of winter vegetables. Their tall trunks displayed scores of scars—evidence of years of tapping for sap—and the sharp, spiky fronds sprouting from the top resembled the knotted hair on the heads of witches that inhabited the fairytales of my childhood. On the other side of the trees lay an old family graveyard, unkempt with high grass, wildflowers, and shrubs, through which pecked gray and white headstones, an unusual element in a Bengali Muslim cemetery. How fitting, I thought, that these trees, whose ornery appearance so belied the sweet redolence of their sap, should stand between the mysteries of life and death.

I was visiting a friend’s home in a Bangladesh village famed for the taste and aroma of its khejur gur—as Bengalis call the liquid syrup processed from the sap of the date palm tree as well as the solid, fudge-like chunks made by boiling it down. Having grown up in a big, bustling Indian city like Calcutta, I had never actually seen khejur gur being made, although from my earliest days I had been aware of its near-mythic status in Bengali gastronomy. When I received the invitation to visit, I simply couldn’t resist the opportunity to observe the process that transformed the clear syrup tapped from the tree into rich, brown liquid gur and bowl-shaped rounds of solid or patali gur. As the December evening deepened, I turned to go inside my friend’s ancestral home, filled with a pleasurable anticipation of the morning to come. My host had promised to wake me early with a glass of the syrup that would have accumulated at night in clay pots suspended from the tree trunks. Nothing, according to the locals, was more refreshing than that pale, clear, unprocessed liquid. Not even orange juice. However, it has to be drunk almost with the first light of dawn. The heat of the sun—even the mild, wintry sun of tropical Bengal—starts a process of fermentation, which affects the purity of the taste.

In modern Bengali parlance, gur stands for any unrefined sugar, whether produced from sugarcane juice or the sap of date and other kinds of palms. While sap from coconut, palmyra, and sago palms is harvested from the spathes they produce during flowering season, it is the trunk of the date palm tree that has to be tapped for its sap.

The history of sugar production in India goes back to antiquity, as can be seen from references to sugarcane and its juice in Sanskrit texts written as early as 1500 B.C. The etymology of the terms for various kinds of sugar bears testimony to a longtime gastronomic presence. The term gur, deriving from the Sanskrit guda, meaning ball, was used to describe the round disks made from either coagulated cane juice or palm sap. The generic meaning of the word, however, was later contested by the great fifth-century physician Charaka, who declared that guda derived from Gauda, as Bengal was called in antiquity. Given the Bengalis’ reputation both as sweet makers and passionate consumers, Charaka’s theory seems plausible. The ancients also used the term khanda (from which the English word candy is derived) to designate large lumps of sugar. As for the English term “sugar,” it stems from the Sanskrit sharkara, meaning gravel or pebble, an apt description for...
a granulated sweetener. Indians probably discovered how to make granulated sugar from cane juice as early as the fourth century B.C. Alexander the Great’s soldiers described with amazement a product that resembled “stones the color of frankincense, sweeter than figs or honey,” clearly a reference to brown sugar crystals.

The Bengali/Indian date palm, *Phoenix sylvestris* (the Sanskrit name being *kharjur*, which has become *khejur* in Bengali), is related to the better known palm tree of the Middle East, the *Phoenix dactylifera*, which is thought to have originated in the desert oases of Africa and Southwest Asia. The trees of the Middle East are justly famous for their juicy, substantial dates. The Bengali date palm, unlike its desert-bred cousin, prefers humid, alluvial soil and a moist climate, and the dates it bears are of comparatively poor quality. It is cherished and grown primarily for its sap. Unlike maple syrup, which is mostly featured on the breakfast table, poured over waffles and pancakes, and is used as an occasional flavoring for ice cream or producing fudge candy, *khejur gur* has a starring role in Bengali desserts throughout the winter when the tapping and processing take place. Unlike cane juice, date palm syrup cannot be made into sugar crystals because of its chemical structure.

When date palm syrup is harvested in the Middle East and the countries of Southeast Asia, it is not for use as a sweetener but to be fermented and made into liquor. Consequently, there is a marked difference in the management of the trees. The Bengali way of cutting and tapping the tree is more environmentally sustainable, with the cuts being made in the trunk instead of in the head. This mutilates the trees far less and allows them to regenerate regularly. In the rural economy of Bengal, well-kept trees are an asset that can be used to pay off debts or serve as part of a marriage dowry.

Tapping for *gur* in Bengal (including the Indian state of West Bengal and the country of Bangladesh) begins in late October, after the *aman* rice (the year’s staple crop) has been safely harvested and farmers enjoy relative leisure as they prepare their fields for planting winter vegetables and the spring or *boro* rice crop. The season lasts until late February, with the best quality sap being produced in December and January. Although *gur* made from the earliest tapping is not the best in terms of flavor and taste, it is valued as an ingredient (along with the newly harvested rice) for offerings made to the gods during Nabanno, the harvest festival.

Tapping is considered an art, and every village has one or two masters who are famed for their touch. Expert tappers, sometimes called *gachhis* (from the Bengali word *gachh*, meaning “tree”) climb up the rough trunks carrying one or more sharp scythe-like knives in baskets tied around their waist. Their first job is to peel off all the old leaves below the crown and trim off the outer tissues covering the trunk. This is done several times over a period of a week to ten days, so that only a few layers of inner tissue are exposed at a time and then allowed to be grown over with a webby bark. Too deep an exposure of the tree’s insides is fatal. Finally, when the tapper judges the time to be right, he carefully makes a V-shaped notch, inserts a slender piece of split bamboo into the narrow point of the notch, and positions a clay pot underneath so that the sap can flow into it throughout the night. The pot is taken down in the morning, but sometimes the farmers are thwarted by mischievous and daring children who quietly pull down the pot, drink the juice, and replace the empty container before scampering off.

My day in the village began as expected—with a tall glass of fragrant, clear palm sap. Its unclouding sweetness was astonishing. In the late morning, it was time for the *gur*-makers to start their work. The sap was poured into a large iron wok which was placed on top of a wood-fired furnace. As it kept boiling, the surface was covered with froth, which the *gur*-maker repeatedly skimmed off with a ladle, just the way one does when cooking lentils. In about a quarter of an hour, the liquid began to thicken, the color changed to a rich dark brown like that of deep amber maple syrup, and the characteristic aroma of *khejur gur* filled the air.

Processed *gur* comes in three categories. The treacly liquid resulting from the initial boiling is called *nolen* (derived from the Turkish word for “new”) *gur* or *jhola gur*, the latter adjective being derived from *jhola*, the Bengali term for “broth.” In the markets, it is sold in small earthen pitchers called *nagris*. For Bengalis, *jhola gur* has been immortalized in a nonsense poem written by Sukumar Ray, father of the great Indian filmmaker Satyajit Ray. Reminiscent of the song “These Are a Few of My Favorite Things” in *The Sound of Music*, the poem enumerates the best things of life and declares that the best of the best is *jhola gur* poured over a slice of bread. The second stage of processing creates a grainy, sticky version that is equally delectable with homemade chapattis and commercial breads. Some people refer to it as *nagri*, because like the *jhola gur*, this, too is sold in *nagris*. The third and final version of *khejur gur* is solid—formed into a disk called *patali*, about two to three inches in thickness and five or six inches in diameter. It has a fudge-like consistency and quickly melts in the mouth. Once the boiling mixture is judged to be ready, the *gur*-maker pours it over a clean cloth draped over a line of shallow, rounded pits previously dug into a mound of soil.
The weight of the gur makes the cloth sink into each of the pits, which serve as molds for the patali gur. Once they have dried, the disks are easily removed from the cloth and wrapped up for sale. They can be stored in the refrigerator for almost a year—a fact that Bengali expatriates all over the world take advantage of.

Throughout Bengal, both confectioners and home cooks eagerly anticipate winter, when they can switch from cane sugar to khejur gur. Over the centuries, Bengalis have developed a wide variety of sweets that are known by the generic name of pittha, made with whole milk, wheat and rice flour, grated coconut, and thickly evaporated milk. All of these are sweetened with khejur gur in winter, and it is no exaggeration to say that in areas noted for the quality of their date palms, the air is almost continuously infused with the redolence of khejur gur. Aside from pittha, one of Bengal’s favorite homemade desserts is payesh (rice pudding made without eggs), which has an aura of sanctity that makes it ideal for ritual offerings. Khejur gur significantly enhances the taste and flavor of payesh. From the late eighteenth century, cottage cheese or chhana became the prime material for confectioners, thus giving birth to the legendary sweets now synonymous with Bengal—rosogolla, sandesh, pantua, rajbhog, chamcham, and many others. Initially, cane sugar was the sweetener of choice for all of them. In the late nineteenth century, however, the confectioners of Nadia district in West Bengal began to experiment by using the freshly made khejur gur to sweeten sandesh. The product became wildly popular, and now it is hard to imagine a Bengali who does not yearn during the winter for this version of a beloved sweet—the whiteness of chhana tinted brown-beige, the delicate flavor of milk happily married to the distinctive essence of khejur gur.

It is not surprising that a product that generates such obsessive devotion should permeate the culture and ethos in ways beyond ingesting. Practitioners of Ayurvedic medicine swore by the health benefits of any kind of palm sugar, and modern medical research seems to support their claims. Khejur gur has a far lower glycemic index than cane sugar.
and also contains some essential minerals and vitamins. Residents of areas famed for the superior quality of their khejur gur take pride in bragging about it. The envious sometimes respond with a backhanded compliment, as in the jocular couplet describing the district of Faridpur in Bangladesh as a place noted for its thieves, swindlers, and khejur gur. Paintings and woodcuts often depict palm trees with clay pots suspended from their trunks. The Bauls, a community of roving minstrels whose songs are inspired by Sufi spirituality, often use the tapping of sap in a clay pot as a metaphor for their ritual practice of sexual retention. Bengali literature is replete with references to this magical ingredient. In a hilarious short story, Narayan Gangopadhyay describes a Bengali—justifiably proud of his khejur gur—offering a sample to a derisive British officer who shares a train compartment with him. The latter is so entranced by the delightful taste of this novelty, that he tricks the Bengali into agreeing to an exchange; just before getting off the train, he takes the Bengali’s entire stock of gur and leaves him with a large package supposedly containing his favorite food that is equally delicious. It turns out to be a pumpkin.

Such stories were frequently told in my childhood home during winter when my father, a gur aficionado, scoured the markets for both liquid and solid khejur gur. After each foray he was the first one to taste the product with the solemn concentration that is normally seen only among tea and wine tasters. Once the verdict had been pronounced—and sometimes it could be disappointing—the rest of us could happily indulge ourselves regardless of the esoteric points of taste, consistency, and flavor.

Even in today’s globalized age, with restaurants providing the cuisines of many countries to city dwellers everywhere, khejur gur continues to be an obsession for Bengalis—ordinary consumers, discerning gourmets, or confectioners. The culinary imagination refuses to rest on the laurels of the past. A prime example of this is the recent transformation of Bengal’s second most-famous sweet, rosogolla. A literal translation of the word would be “a ball in syrup,” a perfect description of the cottage cheese balls floating in a mild sugar syrup. Although sandesh in winter had been sweetened with khejur gur for more than a century, the rosogolla had not. During the past decade or so, however, confectioners in Calcutta have boldly gone where no one has gone before, using a light syrup of khejur gur to immerse their rosogolla in winter. A shocking idea for traditionalists, this new version of rosogolla is a delightful revelation for the unprejudiced palate.

Even those who specialize only in making sandesh are coming up with newer ways to felicitate the marriage of chhana with khejur gur, as can be confirmed by a visit to the legendary north Calcutta shop bearing the names of Girish Chandra Ghosh and Nakur Nandy. The business has not moved from where it originally started in 1845, but behind its unpretentious glass cases filled with a variety of sandesh with alluring names, one can sense a hive of activity infused with flashes of genius. One of their newest concoctions is called the monohara, literally “that which steals your heart.” At first glance, it is hard to think of this object, with its smooth surface and deep brown color, as a sandesh, since chhana or cottage cheese can never achieve that texture or color. One bite reveals the mystery. The soft, white chhana is completely encased in a firm shell of solid khejur gur, each element retaining its individuality, yet melting into a delectable union on the tongue. With every successive mouthful, the entranced consumer is only too happy to let her heart be stolen.