

# “Fighting” COVID-19 with Anti-Corona Sandesh

APRIL 25, 2020: KOLKATA, INDIA

India is reportedly the largest nation-state to impose a lockdown as a preventive measure to contain the spread of COVID-19. As of April 25, 2020, we have entered the thirty-second day of lockdown. Given the federal structure of Indian politics, state governments across India have taken different measures to ensure essential supplies—including food. Food industries ranging from restaurants to street-side food stalls have been hit by COVID-19. Sweetshops in West Bengal are no different. West Bengal is known for milk-based sweets prepared from chhana—an intermediate base made from the coagulation of milk through the separation of whey water. Chhana-based sweets, depending on the consistency of the cooked paste, can have a shelf life of two to seven days depending on weather and refrigeration facilities. Unlike other milk bases, such as khoa (desiccated milk) chhana-based sweets have a shorter shelf life and therefore are considered a delicacy.

Within seven days of the lockdown, after an appeal put forth by Paschimbanga Mistanna Byabasayi Samiti (the business association of sweetshop owners of West Bengal), the state government issued an order on March 30, 2020, that sweetshops could remain operational from 12 noon to 4 p.m. with minimal staff. Sweets have never been part of the “essential” commodity list. However, sweets are an important part of Bengali food culture. While netizens and sweetshop owners have welcomed the government order, it is not the first time that sweets came under the purview of “food control” measures.

In 1965, the then-state government had banned the production of sweets because they felt that there was a shortage of milk due to its diversion into sweetshops. The court proceedings reported that the sweetshop owners buy milk at a higher price and therefore milk and chhana suppliers prefer selling their products to sweetshops. The ban encouraged sweetshop owners to make sweets from non-milk products. It was argued that milk is an essential commodity necessary for infants and is the source of nutrition, and that the transformation of

milk into sweet delicacies such as rosogolla and sandesh was detrimental to the nutritional needs of the population. However, the state government faced severe criticism because this ban meant a threat to the livelihood of workers associated with sweetshops (Dey 2015).

Amidst the lockdown imposed to contain the spread of COVID-19, the state government’s announcement to open sweetshops was viewed as a measure to protect livelihoods—mainly of those associated with the milk and chhana supply. Gastronomic symbols like sweets are a powerful semiotic device in the sociopolitical life of West Bengal. During the run up to election results, sweetshops gear up with edible replicas of party symbols. Until 2010, the Left Front Government and symbols of the political parties—the Communist Part of India (Marxist) and the Indian National Congress—inspired the sweetmakers of West Bengal. The Left Front Government came into power in 1977 and was at the helm of power for thirty years. The State Assembly poll results in 2011 ushered in a new era of change. During my doctoral fieldwork in 2011, during which I observed with the entry of All India Trinamool Congress party in the political landscape, the show cases of the sweetshops had sweet replicas of twin flowers in the grass (the party emblem of All India Trinamool Congress). The design of sweets is influenced by the contemporary context, and it is not a coincidence that the humble chhana and khoya have been molded into various forms and sizes to honor a historic moment, or to respond to a global health crisis.

The global pandemic inspired one of the sweetmakers to create a sweet named after the virus. Hindusthan Sweets, one of the well-known sweetshops in Kolkata, chose to respond to COVID-19 with a special sandesh (a taxonomy of sweets made from the cooked paste of chhana). Shaped like the coronavirus, the sandesh is a replica of the image created by medical illustrators Alissa Eckert and Dan Higgins of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Unlike the original image with a gray base, red spike proteins, yellow e-proteins, and orange M-proteins, the sweet retains the red spike proteins on a red

disc. Although the creator, RK Paul, would like to call the sweet Anti-Corona Mishti (Mishti being the Bengali word for sweets), netizens and sweets connoisseurs have named it Corona Mishti. For Paul, this sweet is a way to spread awareness about the virus. In fact, Anti-Corona Mishti are being distributed as sweets to create awareness. In an interview with a leading daily, Paul said, “People are just so scared looking at news of all the people dying in Italy, US, and Spain. That’s why I had this idea of creating an anti-corona ‘mishti.’ We are at war with the disease. And we are not scared. We will eat it out and digest it” (Bhura 2020).

COVID-19 has spiraled war metaphors in the statist and popular imagination. Words such as “fight,” “control,” “Corona Warriors” and “disciplined soldier” (for the migrant worker) are often-used words and phrases in a public healthcare crisis in India. In the absence of adequate medical redress against COVID-19, the food industry is abuzz with immunity-boosting foods for the well-being of the body. Sweets lie outside the map of the ingestion economy. Popularly associated with

health risks such as obesity and diabetes, sweets are seen as an item of excess—often as a marker of luxury—yet necessary to the cultural, social, and ritual landscape of Bengal. Amidst these risks, the case of Anti-Corona Mishti by Hindusthan Sweets shows how a food item finds its relevance in an otherwise immunity-driven gastronomic world of ingestion, healing and care. This metaphorical ingestion of the virus through a sweet replica shows the myriad ways in which “social” meanings of ingestion are invoked to find relevance for a food that is nonessential, an item of excess, and outside the ambit of “nutrition.” 

#### REFERENCES

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