

'The King of Sweets'

Porabarir 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.

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 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.

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.

Today only three shops in Porabari sell this Chamcham made in 10-12 homes. But still the Haluis of Porabari and Panchani Bazar make hundreds of mounds of Chamcham daily and supply those to over 500 shops across the country, around 100 of them in Dhaka.

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.