
Book Review

Journal of Liberal Arts and
Interdisciplinary Sciences

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Ishita Dey, *Sweet Excess: Crafting Mishti in Bengal*, 2026, 270 pp., Routledge. ISBN: 978-1-032-29186-4 (hbk); 978-1-041-11320-1 (pbk); 978-1-003-65942-6 (ebk)

DOI: 10.1177/XXXXXXXXX261475815

In her magnum opus, *Sweet Excess: Crafting Mishti in Bengal*, Ishita Dey introduces us to one of the dominant food items of quotidian Bengali diets, which cannot be labeled a necessity but rather a luxury with no such nutritional value, yet without which the everyday cultural norms of hospitality of Bengali foodscapes and the very *Bengaliness* remain incomplete in a geography whose food history is ravaged by famine, distress, partition, war, and migration. This book is based on a decade-long multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in West Bengal, India, and Bangladesh, enabling the author to map cross-border geographies and juxtapose narratives, counternarratives, subjectivities, and claims surrounding *mishti*-making with historiographic archives on caste, borders, partition, migration, and tradition. She traces the biography of *Bengal mishti* across borders, gender, caste, religion, cuisine, and legal systems and examines the invisible laboring body within home and commercial sweet shops to decode the culturally coded sociality of sweetness in everyday Bengali lives. Rejecting the binary view of sweetness as either luxury or necessity, the author urges us to understand sweetness in this particular cultural-geographical context as *excess* through its material and symbolic meanings. In other words, mapping sweetness across cultural rituals, aesthetic politics of risks (i.e., health) and waste, and artisanal sustenance, she argues that the life of Bengal mishti is best understood through the lens of excess. The author does not rush to debunk the omnivorousness of sweetness and its symbolic value in Bengali sociocultural, political, and religious life in both *Epar* and *Opar* Bengal (West Bengal and Bangladesh). Juxtaposing sweetness with opulence and necessity, indulgence and hospitality, she unveils its unparalleled presence as the marker of gifts, celebration, and status across socio-religious and nonreligious occasions, from worship, rituals, and festivals to the announcement of election results and examination results.

This book is divided into eight chapters. Offering a methodological detour to trace the biography of sweetness and sweet shops and the nomenclature across



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place, caste, gender, labor form, heritage, and rituals in a cross-border convergent culture in chapter two, the author moves to the third chapter to connect the reader with the symbolic and ritualistic associations of sweetness with place, geography, and regional identity. She skillfully maps the place-based associations of sweets to underscore how the biography of sweetness contributes to ideas of placemaking, local branding, and heritage claims and how we attach meanings to sweetness through the lens of the degree of sweetness (*beshi mishti* and *kom mishti*), rituals (devotion and gift exchange), borders (*Epar* and *Opar* Bengal), religion (Hindu and Muslim), caste (confectioner and others), gendered labor and craftsmanship (male and female), and space (commercial and domestic kitchens). Hence, the author urges us to study sweetness through movements of men and cows and through the ecological shifts during partition, migration, war, and famine, arguing, “[t]ales of origin tied to placemaking remain incomplete without tracing ‘movements,’ especially in cases where confluences of human and non-human life are central to the making of a sweet” (p. 69).

Drawing the reader’s attention to the mythical status of Mayara in West Bengal and Ghosh in Bangladesh in chapter four, the author diligently disentangles how other communities involved in the social fabric of sweet-making have been invisibilized and the way particular caste groups have been synonymized as artisanal samaj, craftsmanship, intergenerational occupations, originality, ownership, traditions, and, finally, authenticity. A reading of the celebration of caste as cultural heritage through craftsmanship remains incomplete without a thorough engagement with the historiography of partition, post-partition migration, and nation-building movements in South Asia. Strikingly, Dey polemically debunks this in the present chapter. The 1947 partition and post-partition nation-building projects remain the cornerstone of South Asian historiography, which changed borders, identity, politics, language, and the sociocultural lives of people while upholding imagined communities through shared symbols, rituals, language, food, and nostalgia. In this way, sweet, a symbolic material, upholds Bengali identity beyond borders and reminds us of the migration of artisans during partition and of how people from non-confectioner castes/religions embrace the sweet-making business. However, the glory of caste as cultural registers of excess fades when the lives of craftsmen and artisans “oscillate between their pride in their art and craft and their status as wage labor in a craft-based industry that is based on developing a sense of *andaz* based on sensory labor of synaesthesia of touch, feel, smell, and observation” (pp. 135–136). The craft of making sweets, as the author illustrates in chapter five, requires an experienced eye and a trained hand with extended rhythm, repetition, and sensory labor.

The last two chapters on legal provisions governing sweets and the GI/authorship claims caught my attention, and I was intrigued to learn how public reaction to the ban on *chhana*-based sweets and the state’s intervention to protect raw milk from coagulation (*chhana*) caused a political backlash. The author once again urges us to reread history to see how the state’s claim that milk is essential and sweets are nonnutritive and, hence, a luxury, and the control orders that give rise to public discontent and form movements to protect cultural heritage, ritual values, citizens’ rights, and the occupational safety of the Mayaras in the production and distribution

of milk-based sweets. History further underscores borders as a critical aspect of place-making and authenticity claims for certain sweets. The author eloquently interrogates the relevance of the GI debate of place and romantic authorship in safeguarding authenticity and standardization of a food item with a short shelf life that is embedded in a cross-border geography and movements, “with shared lineages across borders and more so with a history of craftsmen who were forced to move” (p. 176). Lastly, the author synthesizes a theoretical lens of excess, combining it with ritual, artisanal, and standardizing values of sweetness in the final chapter.

Through the lens of excess, *Sweet Excess* enables readers to study sweetness as a cultural and ritualistic identity, a caste-based craft and sensory labor, and to appreciate repetition, authenticity, and standardization in a cross-border geography marked by legacies of food deprivation, while making room for celebration. The idea of excess, here, informs the ways of reclamation, regeneration, renewal, and revival of identity, ritual, legacy, celebration, and performativity. Unlike viewing excess as merely wasteful, irrational, or non-recupable (Bataille, 1989), Dey crafts excess through sweetness as a potential for upholding care, aesthetics, tradition, sociality, value, sensory labor, identity, and the intuition of the Bengali self and the imagery of Bengal. While scholarship on South Asian food studies mostly highlights themes such as religious symbolism and dietary patterns, caste and commensality, culinary distinctiveness, gastro-politics, agroecology, and food insecurity (Appadurai, 1981, 1988; Mookherjee, 2008; Staples, 2016), *Sweet Excess* offers a detailed ethnographic account of the production of aesthetic value, artisanal sweet-making, craftsmanship, sensory knowledge, and the social life of Bengal *mishti*. Overall, this book, written in a polemical style, is a must-read masterpiece for sociologists and food anthropologists, as well as historians, foodies, cultural critics, and readers from all walks of life.

ORCID iD

Abdullah Al Mozahid  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6697-4778>

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Abdullah Al Mozahid

*Department of Sociology and Sustainable Development
Premier University, Chittagong, Bangladesh
E-mails: abdullah.ssd@puc.ac.bd; abdullahmsau@gmail.com*