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Confecting Creole Bengal, from *Sandesh* to *Rosogolla*: Textural Transformations and Sonic Recall

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ABSTRACT

Sandesh and rosogolla, two chhana (milk curds)-based sweets emblematic of the Bengali palate and identity, are popularly attributed to the Portuguese introduction of milk curdling into Bengal. While collective memory situates sandesh's emergence during what we call "creole Bengal," when different European powers operated in the Hooghly district, rosogolla was purportedly invented in 1868 in Calcutta, then capital of British India. We analyse this temporal disjunction alongside similarities and differences in texture, shape and production, to reveal the sandesh as the prototype of mofussil creolization and the rosogolla, its metropolitan end-product; furthermore, we track the translation of taste into sound within 19th century Bengali nursery rhymes and kobigaan songs. By placing these memorialization processes against the politics of class and caste involved in the production of sandesh and rosogolla, we investigate how, at specific historical conjunctures, these sweets activate memories of a Creole Bengal shaped by transoceanic exchanges and encounters.

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> Nowhere else in India does the confectioner work such magic through manipulating the substance derived by cutting milk with acid. (Chitrita Banerji, "How the Bengalis Discovered *Chhana*," 2000)

> In Bengal, though there is a great tendency of self-identification with the ruling nation, the Portuguese stamp can be discerned on whatever they came in contact with. (J. A. Campos, *History of the Portuguese in Bengal*, 1919)

> Creolization is a miracle begging for analysis. (Michel-Rolph Trouillot, "Culture on the Edges," 2006)

Bengal, encompassing Bangladesh and the state of West Bengal within India, is famed for the milk-based sweets that distinguish its sweet tooth from that of elsewhere in South Asia. As food historian Chitrita Banerji reminds us in the first epigraph, the Bengali confectioner's forte is the creation of a dizzying range of sweets from not milk *per se*, but fresh curds (*chhana* in Bangla). Derived by splitting milk with an acidic substance, *chhana* is converted into sweets through the addition of sugar or jaggery. *Chhana*-

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based sweets, including the iconic *sandesh* and *rosogolla*, were popularized after the introduction of milk curdling into Bengal by the Portuguese who were in the region by the sixteenth century – or so it is widely accepted in Bengal.[1] Sweets intimately associated with the Bengali palate and identity are thus assigned a complex genealogy by collective memory. This genealogy draws on the "Portuguese stamp" on Bengali culture, which as the second epigraph reminds us,[2] persists despite the heavy Anglophone influence on Bengali urban culture, sealed by Calcutta's preeminent position within the British Empire. The historian J. J. A. Campos's assertions of the tenacity of Portuguese cultural influence in Bengal implies a contested memorial landscape, shaped by traces not just of the Portuguese but of other European powers, including the Dutch, the French, the Danish, and of course, the British.

Persisting beyond the absorption of Bengal into the British Empire, the memory work around these traces complicate binaristic oppositions of (British) colonizer and (Bengali) post/colonized, revealing instead transcultural encounters and exchanges within a long-term contact zone comprising, on the one hand, European enclaves established on the left bank of the Hooghly River and, on the other, British Calcutta on the river's right bank. We argue that, by associating the Portuguese with *sandesh* and *rosogolla*, Bengalis *recollect*, or integrate into their collective memory, the non-Anglophone European legacy of this composite contact zone, which we call "Creole Bengal."[3] From this perspective, the confectioner's "magic" identified by Banerji is a manifestation of creolizing processes that, "miraculous" though they may appear, nevertheless must, as Michel-Rolph Trouillot reminds us in our third epigraph, be analyzed.[4] Accordingly, we examine the creolizing processes in Bengal that resulted in the *sandesh* and *rosogolla*, paying particular attention to their respective tastes, textures, and the materialities of their making; but we also examine the modes of recollection that affectively evaluate these mouthfeel characteristics against changing historical contexts and technologies of reproduction. We thereby demonstrate that the malleable, crumbly *sandesh* is associated with mofussil creolization occurring at "a moment of European proto-expansionism" on the Hooghly's left bank, at a time when "desire and enchantment had not yet hardened into colonial relations of bitterness and oppression,"[5] – nor indeed, into the *rosogolla* of Calcutta, which, unlike *sandesh*, is a spongy but unyielding sphere.

We align these temporal and textural differences with the popular cultural narrative of the *rosogolla*'s invention in Calcutta by the confectioner Nabin Chandra Das (1845–-1925), who was the grandson-in-law of Bhola Moira (ca.1778-ca.1851), a legendary confectioner from Hooghly's Guptipara neighborhood, and credited with opening the first *sandesh* shop in Calcutta's Bagbazaar in 1851.[6] Placing the kinship ties between Das and Bhola Moira beside the continued use of *chhana* within changing confectionery traditions and processes (and concomitant changes in texture), we posit the *rosogolla* as metonym of the transformation of creole Bengal under the changing circumstances of British imperial rule.[7] Bengali popular culture regularly activates the memory of these successive transformations by translating taste into sound.[8] We hence track the *sonic recall* of these sweets and their makers within Bengali folktales and nursery rhymes that moved from orature to print through the folklorist Dakshinaranjan Mitra Majumdar's 1907 anthology, *Thakurmar Jhuli* (*Grandmother's Bundle*),[9] as well as within scholarly and cinematic accounts of the folk-poetic encounter between Bhola Moira ("Bhola of the confectioner caste") and another iconic figure, Antony Firingi ("Antony the European,"

c. 1786–1836).[10] We assess these intermedial transformations against the caste identity transmitted by *moira* and the creolized indeterminacy signaled by *firingi*. The memorialization of creole Bengal in the nineteenth century and its postcolonial continuations, through the sensory appeal of sweets "integral to the Bengali diet and commercial sweetscape," then emerges as responses to long-standing contestations in Bengal around caste, language, and religion as identity-markers.

Our reading thereby complicates recent scholarship on Bengal that, in different ways, mobilizes foodways to illuminate identity issues, with a particular focus on the Bengali "cultural obsession with milk-based sweets."[11] So deep is this "obsession" that it even surfaces in a Bengali historian's account of what her edited volume on global food history intends to accomplish: "The volume seeks to explore how food, cooking and cuisine … are essentially results of *confection* – combination – of ingredients, ideas, ideologies and imagination … *churned* out of transcultural flows of goods, people and ideas, colonial encounters and engagements, adventure and adaptation, and change in attitude and taste, [that] enable convergent histories of the globe *kneaded* by food … that are ever ready to be cast in different *moulds*." (emphasis ours).[12] Strikingly, the italicized verbs are all associated with *sandesh* and *rosogolla* production. We return such metaphorization to a material and embodied level, deploying swirled models of creolization that map circuits of interaction between people, commodities, and ideas across the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds, and across hinterland and littorals.[13] New circuits do not replace older ones; rather, processes of superimposition and sedimentation both before and after the European advent within the Indian Ocean find a material equivalent in the co-existence of *chhana* and *rosogolla* into the present. This creolized co-existence becomes a heuristic lever through which we reopen questions of Bengali identity and belonging by departing radically from aspirations to cultural purity based on caste, language, and religion.

Aguas Do Gange and Firingis in Bengal: Hooghly's Creolizing Enclaves

Rohit, a young man born in a Gujarati mercantile family of Kolkata (the postcolonial name for imperial Calcutta), woos Mahamaya, a Bengali woman from the same city. To impress her with his dedication to Bangla culture, he goes to Portugal to do a PhD on Bengali music. There he comes across the story of the nineteenth-century *kobiyal* singer of mixed Portuguese and Bengali heritage, "Hensman Antony," better known as "Antony Firingi," purportedly born in Farashdanga, a neighborhood within the Hooghly town of Chandernagore (present-day Chandannagar).[14] Rohit travels to Chandannagar to find out more about Antony Firingi. There, he meets a librarian, Kushal, who claims to be Antony's reincarnation. This is the subject matter of a Bengali film from 2014, *Jaatishwar* (Bangla, *The Reincarnate*).[15] Suturing together the postcolonial present and the nineteenth-century past is the film's soundtrack that draws on the *kobigaan* folk songs Antony Firingi became associated with, in particular those constituting the contest between him and Bhola Moira, the Bagbazaar-based confectioner who first commercialized the production and sale of *sandesh*.[16] In these song duels, Antony is taunted for praying to Jesus Christ in the "girja" (Bangla, "church," from Portuguese *igreja*) of the Danish settlement of Serampore,[17] as well as for discarding the accouterments of boots, top hat and coat for the garb of a Bengali mendicant.[18] Antony responds singing that he is a child of this land and that Bengal is equally the Firingi's as Bhola's ("Firingir-o Bangla desh").

These *kobigaan* compositions had inspired an earlier cinematic evocation of Antony's life and times, the much-loved and viewed Bengali film *Antony Firingi* (1967) "that has remained a steady point of reference for Anthony's existence."[19] Both films mobilize the *kobiyal* tradition to evoke a particular time and place in Bengal: when a Portuguese-descended man with a Dutch-sounding element ("Hensman") within his "actual" name, born in Farashdanga (Bangla, "the pond-side of the French") in Chandernagore, a town controlled by the French, mocked for worshipping at a Danish-built church in the next town, associated with European clothing whose English names had entered the Bangla lexicon as seamlessly as had the Portuguese word for "church," could spar musically with a confectioner on ecumenical theology and multiple modes of belonging. What is it about Antony Firingi that catalyzed two acclaimed films at different moments for postcolonial Bengal? This figure "activates" the memory of a cosmopolitan past spatially associated with West Bengal's Hooghly district: the peerless "aguas do Gange e terra de Bengala" (Portuguese, "waters of the Ganges and the land of Bengal") celebrated by Luis de Camões (*Lusiadas* Canto VII, stanza xx). The Hooghly River (a downstream tributary of the Ganges) and its littoral topography drew the Portuguese to Bengal in pursuit of trade starting from 1516.[20] The first Europeans to establish a continuous presence here, they founded a chain of settlements centered on Bandel Church, erected in 1599.[21]

The Portuguese were followed by the Dutch, the French, the Danish, and the British. These would-be colonial powers entered Bengal at different times but occupied it co-temporally by the nineteenth century. They founded settlements – Dutch Chinsurah, French Chandernagore, Danish Serampore and Portuguese Bandel – cheek-by-jowl alongside a stretch of the Hooghly across which the British founded Calcutta in 1690. The cosmopolitan nature of imperial Calcutta is well established by scholarship and celebrated in popular understanding of its urban history.[22] However, a "creole cosmopolitanism" had already developed in the Hooghly towns.[23] As the 1967 film *Antony Firingi* confirms, this milieu remained important in popular postcolonial Bengali consciousness, while Antony's 2014 cinematic reappearance coincides with a resurgent interest in it spearheaded by a heritage industry working in tandem with projects funded by the governments of the countries historically involved in the Hooghly enclaves.[24] Yet, only recently have the cultural implications of these multiple European presences begun to be scrutinized – most prominently, within Saugata Bhaduri's argument for Bengal's "polycoloniality."[25] This term, while reminding us of diverse European powers operating in Bengal, remains, however, purely descriptive; it is unable to explicate the ensuing processes of cultural encounter. Bhaduri falls back on romanticizing rather than analyzing the "polycolonial spirit" – lauding Antony Firingi, for instance, as exemplary of its innate "hybridity, of pluralism, of mutual respect, of tolerance, of syncretism."[26]

Bengal's Sweet Tooth, Curdled and Creolized: From Chhana to Sandesh

Following Ananya Jahanara Kabir's work on extending theories of creolization to reconceptualize Indic cultural history, we propose "creole Bengal" as the most suitable lens for unpacking, analyzing, and assessing the "polycoloniality" that Bhaduri identifies. Creolization, in Kabir's use, signals the historical processes that generate innovative, adaptive, and unexpected cultural forms in contact zones that are themselves creolized in the process.[27] Creolization involves physical intimacy between peoples, but creolized

cultures are formed and disseminated through proximate co-habitation, often violent and coerced, in creolized space. The term has usually implied the encounter of Africans and Europeans in the Atlantic world within the master-slave framework, with selective application to Indian Ocean islands where this framework applies.[28] By developing existing research on specific insular and littoral sites of creolization worldwide, including approaches that propose mercantilism alongside slavery as creolization's vectors,[29] Kabir analyzes cultural encounters within Indian littoral enclaves, such as Goa and Pondicherry, as examples of peninsular, mercantile-driven creolization.[30] We extend this approach to Bengal's Hooghly district, also a littoral space with its congeries of towns and settlements controlled by different European powers with interests that were – at least initially – primarily mercantile. Creolization enables us to move beyond over-determined terms such as "syncretism," "pluralism," and "tolerance," that imprison Bhaduri's argument for polycoloniality within a now-dated Nehruvian paradigm, as well as the ahistorical concept, "hybridity," that ironically derives from the same "mono-colonial" genealogy that he critiques.[31]

"Creole Bengal" is evidenced not just in the numerous Portuguese words that have entered the Bengali lexicon, or in other categories of specific elements that successive European presences deposited within the Bengali habitus.[32] Rather, diverse cultural influences became unpredictably swirled into the matrix of the everyday, which then yielded a range of creolized products that became identified with a distinctive Bengaliness emerging through this dialectic of negotiation, innovation, collaboration and compromise. From this perspective, *sandesh* is a creolized product *par excellence*. On the one hand, the curdling of milk is frequently recalled as ritualistically prohibited in Indo-Gangetic Hinduism;[33] on the other, from Bengal alone emerged two distinct Indic cheeses: the salty, feta-like *dhakai paneer* of Dhaka, Bangladesh, and the soft, smoky little roundels known as Bandel cheese, available in Kolkata's New Market, and originating in that very corner of the Hooghly district associated with the Portuguese – the church town of Bandel.[34] The textural similarities between Bandel cheese and Portuguese *queijo fresco* lend analytical support to popular Bengali memory's understanding of curdling as a technique introduced by the Portuguese.[35] Hence, the initially mercantile encounter between two groups instantiated a break with local tradition and taboos, opening a "food niche" for the unexpected creation of a new cultural product.[36] This product took another unexpected turn by becoming the base material for the fashioning of an ever-proliferating range – of not cheeses but, instead, *sandesh*.[37]

Since the region of Bengal was associated with artisanal sweet production long before the advent of Europeans here,[38] this proliferation of *sandesh* varieties illustrates another precept of creolization: the genesis of material and embodied culture through the unpredictable application of new techniques and ideas to preexisting cultural substrates.[39] Bengal's rich tradition of sweets that use pre-colonial techniques involving coconut, jaggery, and reduced or evaporated milk did not disappear; rather, they began to co-exist alongside newer sweets that emerged through incorporating *chhana*.[40] The overall result is a density and sedimentation of cultural products which interact further to generate a spectrum of creolization, and which is characterized by polysemy, with the same name applied to a range of products on this spectrum.[41] *Sandesh* itself illustrates such polysemy, being originally used for sweets derived from *khoya*, or the solids obtained through the reduction of milk by boiling, and subsequently repurposed to

name the new *chhana*-based sweets.[42] Finally, the use of *chhana* for sweets rather than cheese charts a shift from Portuguese Bandel toward French Chandernagore, still renowned for the ultra-moist *jolbhora* ("water-filled") *sandesh*.[43] This co-existence of Bandel cheese, as product from an early phase of creolization, with *jolbhora* as product from a subsequent phase,[44] and their metonymic association with diverse European influences squeezed into the compacted space of Hooghly,[45] attests to the non-linear, multi-directional, and swirled nature of creolizing processes in general.[46]

Mango-*Sandesh* for Khokon: Creolization's Unpredictable Fruits

How was such creolization impacted by Calcutta's rise by the nineteenth century? While Claude Markovits considers the accompanying cultural, economic and political ascendancy of the British as heralding the "demise of Creole India,"[47] we disagree, noting instead ensuing transformations within creolization. The *in-between* space that Rosinka Chaudhuri identifies in nineteenth-century Bengali literature, instigated by "the cross-breeding engendered by colonial rule in an unavoidable cosmopolitanism of contact,"[48] corresponded to much more than the urban milieu within which Calcutta elites, despite their ideological predilections for a pure indigenous past untainted by foreign influences, "materially flourished."[49] Movement between Calcutta and the mofussil towns of the Hooghly district generated a continuum of creolized spaces connecting both banks of the river. Different points on this continuum elicited a competitive creolization that had also started accumulating a temporal thickness as registered in memorializing impulses. The increasingly inter-imperial histories of Bengal as contact zone imbued Bengali cosmopolitanism with the mofussil and folk ethos nurtured by the creolizing, non-Anglophone, Hooghly enclaves. Even as they were marginalized by the metropolitan modernity of imperial Calcutta and the concomitant shift of power to the British, the affective reverberations of these creole worldviews were constantly activated through memory. Contrasting with binaristic presentations of the "contrasting natures of Western and Eastern cultures" within nineteenth-century print media concerning foodways, health, and diet,[50] their more subtle interventions are captured in Dakshinaranjan Majumdar's 1907 anthology *Thakurmar Jhuli* (*Grandmother's Bundle*).

Of particular interest in this context is "Aam Sandesh," its lullaby coda. While signifying the ritual of putting children to sleep at the end of a bedtime story through rocking, patting, singing, and bedtime treats, the phrase "aam sandesh" translates both as "mango-shaped *sandesh*" and "mangoes and sweets." Either way, the collocation recalls *two* creolized products associated with India's Portuguese settlers. [51] Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, they had joined the Bengal *nawabs* in horticultural experimentation through grafting processes that generated innovative mango strains in the orchards of Murshidabad,[52] the Goan *alphonso*, and the Maharashtrian *ratnagiri*.[53] Indeed, the phrase "aam sandesh" semantically grafts two products that arose separately from the same creolizing milieu. That Majumdar's folklore research was undertaken in East Bengal's riverine villages and Hooghly's mofussil towns suggests its covert articulation of a nineteenth-century Bengali nostalgia for an anterior "golden age" of creolization before the shift of power to British Bengal and Calcutta. [54] Yet that very nostalgia also shapes and re-creolizes Majumdar's present. A sedimented Bengali timescape emerges, as suggested by the first *chhara* (rhyme) of "Aam Sandesh," which contains that very phrase.

Entitled "Shona Ghumalo" ("The Darling Sleeps"),[55] this lullaby echoes the older "Chhele ghumalo, para juralo/borgi elo deshe" ("The boy sleeps, silence has set in/The *borgis* are back in our land"). The reference to the Maratha *borgi* or raids on Bengal's towns and villages in the first half of the eighteenth century,[56] in turn recalls the *harmad* (from Iberian *armada*): sea-borne Portuguese raiders who committed fearsome acts of piracy and plunder along the Hooghly River during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.[57]

The poetic texture of "Shona Ghumalo" is molded by this compressed metropolitan memory of the layers of violence formative for mofussil creole Bengal. The lullaby places its addressee, the child Khokon, within an unnamed land bifurcated by a river, whose banks brim with a glittering beauty in intense moonlight. This ocean of beauty stretching across the riverbanks, the land's heaving granaries, and the mother's lap provide a secure environment conducive for Khokon to fall asleep, which indeed he seems to do after consuming the *aam-sandesh*. However, Khokon remains restless, even preferring to roll in the dust rather than lie in his mother's lap. The lullaby concludes with a tacit admission of its ineffectiveness: "Oh dear, what a naughty child! He isn't yet asleep!" The peculiarity of this failed lullaby is heightened by the competing figure of Khokon's aunt who comes visiting, bearing a "strange fruit from unknown lands" ("kon desher phol"), the captive and captivating moon(s) from celestial and nether realms. The very repetitions and rhymes that imbue the lullaby with its sleep-inducing rhythms also secure a metonymic relationship between Khokon and this moon via the opening line, "Khokon Shona, chander kona" ("Khokon darling, piece of the moon"). Khokon is both the piece of the moon, pulled between the mother's lap and her *aam-sandesh*, and the recipient of his visiting aunt's beguiling gift of the full moon as strange fruit. Poised on the threshold of altered consciousness, the restless and multivalent Khokon emits the affective charge of creole Bengal: a liminal, transformative, and temporally layered contact zone that also straddles the two banks of the Hooghly, with the mofussil towns and Calcutta on either side of the river.

From *Chandrapuli* to *Rosogolla*: Sounding the Creole *Rasa*

The two-directional metonymy of Khokon – with the "chander kona" on the one hand, and the "chand" on the other – is also metaphorically linked to the *aam-sandesh* he consumes. Through this triangulated play between association and substitution, the lullaby alludes to various Bengali sweets that are described or named using lunar images, even while it applies those images to confectionery through the mention of *aam-sandesh*. The *chander kona* recalls the half-moon-shaped *chandrapuli*,[58] while the full moon, from which moonlight bursts out to flood the glittering riverbanks, recalls the spherical, white *rosogolla*, popularly described as *chandpana* (Bangla, "moon-like").[59] The coconut-based *chandrapuli* draws on the pre-creolized Bengali confectionery tradition that did not draw on *chhana*, while the *rosogolla*, which transforms the texture of *chhana* from crumbly to spongy through immersion in boiling sugar syrup, exemplifies the continuing, unpredictable transformations that creolization triggers. The move from Khokon as the *chander kona* to Khokon as the *chand* fragments the "Shona Ghumalo" *chhara* into a "before" and "after" of the *chhana*-based *sandesh*, and by extension, the "before" and "after" of the *sandesh*'s creole world.[60] However, the repetition of Khokon's likening to the *chander kona* and *chand*, even as he savors the *aam sandesh*, fractally shatters this

linear temporality.[61] A simultaneity of possibilities is generated thereby, to which is added the polysemic association of *sandesh* with both the *chhana*-based sweet and the sweetened pellets of reduced milk (*khoya*) which originally bore the name of "sandesh." Whether as the *khoya sandesh*, or as the half-moon-shaped *chandrapuli*, the *sandesh*'s pre-*chhana* equivalent inflects creole Bengali space-time, even as it hails the *chhana*-based *sandesh*'s development into the full-moon-shaped *rosogolla*.

These associations between phases of the moon and identifiable points on the spectrum of creolized Bengali confectionery distend and elaborate the in-between timescape of the *sandesh*'s creole world. It is activated by the lullaby's orality, which is ensured by its performative, somatic function even when it is transmitted in print, and reiterated by Khokon's half-asleep state. The repetitive articulation of the *chander kona*/*chand* dialectic enacts a "phonic propulsion" from the before-after timeframe of creolization.[62] To explicate how this sonic release relates to the gustatory associations of the *aam sandesh* consumed by Khokon as his mother sings him to sleep, we turn to a key term of reference in Indic aesthetics: *rasa*. Translating as "juice," as well as the "taste" or "flavor" of an artwork, *rasa* connects its sensory experiencing to essence through an undertone of "'chewing over' – the way sugarcane must be slowly chewed to extract its juice."[63] While in performed and theatrical genres, *rasa* "(or rather its signs) can actually be seen," in "literature that is heard," as in oral narrative recorded in writing (such as our lullaby), *rasa* "can never be a matter of direct denotation."[64] Instead, it is discursively constituted through the deployment of the "linguistic modality," *dhvani*, or "implicature,"[65] that delineates "how something intended but unspoken" – a poem, for example – manifests its *rasa* in "the way an object in a dark room is manifested by a lamp."[66] Through the mechanism of implicature, then, the taste of *aam-sandesh* is sonically transmuted into the aesthetic affect of the lullaby's *rasa*.

Given that curdling as creolization gives rise to *sandesh*, differentiates it from *chandrapuli*, and develops into *rosogolla*, it is a *creole rasa* that the "acoustic persistence" of lunar imagery activates,[67] helped by the polysemy of the term *rasa*. Its quotidian meaning of "juice" is mobilized within the neologism *rosogolla* (juicy sphere), that contrasts to the *kanchagolla* (uncooked sphere) – a basic form of *sandesh*, hand-molded from fresh *chhana* and jaggery.[68] The *kanchagolla*, bearing the direct impress of the mofussil artisan's hand, represents the "raw" as the first stage of creolized confectionery.[69] The *rosogolla*, dependent on semi-industrialized processes to guarantee the sugar syrup's temperature and accelerated production, represents the "cooked" as a stage commensurate with the social transformations taking place in the imperial capital, Calcutta.[70] "raw" *sandesh* proliferates through molds in clay and wood that capitalize on the crumbly malleability of *chhana*,[71] capable of generating infinite varieties in response to current events (note, for instance, the emergence even of the coronavirus-shaped *sandesh*).[72] Meanwhile, the "cooked" *rosogolla* represents both the apotheosis and congealment of creole *rasa*: "you can't do much" with it.[73] Its *chandpana* perfection celebrates creolization's innovative plenitude while heralding its imminent exhaustion. Technologically and affectively, this textural transformation recalls orature's entrapment via newly-minted typefaces for Bangla – forged, like creolized confectionery experiments, by artisans in mofussil bazaars before being elaborated in and for Calcutta.[74] Interestingly, cookbooks detailing new gastronomic protocols for the urban, modern Bengali were also part of this nascent print culture;[75] but their pragmatics do not invite sonic recall like the nursery

rhymes do. Hence, in "Shona Ghumalo," sonic and gustatory realms thus converge to transmit covert nostalgia for the creole life-worlds of the Hooghly district. Even as implicature moves the *chand* from something sighted (the verb *dekhi*, "I see") to something tasted (the noun *phol*, "fruit"), sonic recall somatically infuses both Khokon and lullaby with Bengal's creole *rasa*.

Performative Recall: Activating Creole Bengal Through Sweet Debate

These intermedial and inter-sensory movements between confectionery and lullaby, between taste and sound, between orature and print, and between different manifestations of "vernacular capitalism,"[76] play out the creolized past's continued transformation by the nineteenth-century rise of Calcutta, as well as Calcutta's relationship to creolization as legacy of the Hooghly enclaves. As in insular creolized spaces worldwide, so too in littoral Bengal, a dynamic relationship between creolization, orality, and embodied cultural expressions generates mnemonic archives of creolization as the unpredictable but unstoppable transformation of a Bengali habitus.[77] Performance realizes the ontology of this creolized/creolizing habitus and reactivates its memory. Curdling's creolization of milk into *chhana* for the imaginative proliferation of confectionery provides a "founding scenario" for performing those profound changes that made Bengal a transoceanic mercantile crossroads.[78] The emergence of *chhana* as a necessary element within Bengali confectionery is no mere metaphor for cultural transformation initiated by Europeans, as is often suggested,[79] but a *mise-en-abyme* of process. These confected products of creolization being inanimate commodities for consumption (in both gustatory and commercial senses), their memorialization in performances that enact their impact on human actors deploys rhetorical devices – not just metaphor, but also metonymy, personification, and allegory.[80] To thus dramatize processes of creolization within scenarios that gather cultural traction through repeated performance, the convergence of two transformations under colonial modernization – the curdling of milk and the spread of print culture – emerges singularly useful in commemorating losses and gains around Bengal's entry into global capitalism.

The reference to *aam-sandesh* in "Shona Ghumalo," a nursery rhyme within an anthology of orature, is one of several creolizing scenarios where *dhvani*, or "implicature," transforms texture and taste to sound even as print transforms sound into trace, and somatics transform "acoustic persistence" to performance. The enigmatic quality of nursery rhyme demands a loose alignment between this dialectical interplay, the triangulation between Khokon, his mother, and his aunt, and the allusions to sweets. A more explicit alignment of these meta-semiotic levels is enabled by the sung duel between Antony Firingi and Bhola Moira in their improvised *kobiyal* tradition. Their *kobigaan* (sung debates), preserved in its nineteenth-century edition by scholars like Prafulla Chandra Pal and Durgadas Lahiri,[81] and the basis of postcolonial cinematic narrativization,[82] exemplifies the commemorative confecting of creole Bengal through sonic recall. In these duels, Bhola Moira mirrors Antony in more ways than one. Bhola is the confectioner-singer, whose career moved from *sandesh*-making in Hooghly's Guptipara to *sandesh*-selling in North Calcutta's Bagbazaar, but whose upward mobility is always conditioned by the constricting caste-qualifier "moira."[83] In contrast, Antony Firingi rejected his European habitus for a creolized one, entered a taboo-breaking

relationship with a Brahmin widow, adopted Vaishnavite mendicant garb and getup, absorbed Bengal's folk Islam through emulating the Baul singer, and immersed himself in esoteric Hindu traditions from Tantrism to Shakti-Shiva worship.[84] But Bhola and Antony do not represent opposing responses to creolizing traditions; rather, the pugnacious parrying of *kobigaan* generates cultural innovation through the ebb and flow of debate,[85] even while commemorating the first spark of transformative encounter encoded in the curdling of milk.

"Oh no, I'm not that Bholanath; I'm Bhola the confectioner: I stay in Bagbazaar, I fry sweetmeats all year round."[86] Thus, responds Bhola Moira to Antony Firingi in a celebrated segment of their *kobiyal* sparring that provides the cinematic climax in both *Jaatishwar* and *Antony Firingi*. If Antony's esoteric taunting draws on the creation myth of the churning of the *kheer-shagor* (ocean of thickened, sweetened milk) whereby Bholanath (Shiva) swallowed the poison that was thus extruded,[87] Bhola's retort rejects affiliation with Hindu cosmogony via his divine namesake for the new gods of the North Calcutta bazaar,[88] capitalizing on *chhana* as mark of Hooghly's creole cosmopolitanism that is in due course transformed into commercialized *rosogolla* by his own son-in-law. This exchange deftly contrasts different techniques for textural transformation of milk on either side of the European advent in Bengal as creolization's temporal threshold. Antony's taunt alludes to pre-creolization techniques: reducing milk to produce the *kheer* of the cosmic ocean, and churning milk to produce the butter and curds beloved of Krishna.[89] Bhola in turn alludes to curdling, the European-associated technique for producing *chhana* from which he makes both the hand-kneaded *sandesh* and the new fried sweets now sold in his Bagbazaar shop.[90] In identifying himself as the Bhola of Bagbazaar, he aligns himself to a modernity that layers commercial entrepreneurship onto the strange fruits of creolization, but, as noted earlier, he cannot jettison the caste identity congealed in his moniker, "moira."[91] Antony, representing a composite European-ness who voices mastery over Hindu myths as much as indigenous methods for converting milk to milk-products, embodies the Firingi's reverse creolization on Bengal's shores.[92] The debate form holds in balance this spectrum of creolized possibilities and facilitates their exchange between the opponents, even as the memory of mofussil creole worlds resonantly punctuates their nineteenth-century Bengali ethos.

"Cosmic Ocean," Creolization, and Caste: Memory of Futures Past

"Each time the Bengali rolls his or her tongue around the spongy juiciness of a *rosogolla*, or revels in the delicate graininess of a *sandesh*," muses Chitrita Banerji, "the forgotten encounter between two races comes to life"; yet, she notes this is but a "hazy" memory.[93] We have explicated that haziness by tracking the transformation of confectionery's texture through sonic recall within nineteenth-century Bengali sources, whereby *chhana*-based sweets are remembered as quintessentially Bengali *because* they are products of a creole cosmopolitanism produced through the interaction of different European groups in the Hooghly enclaves, and made possible by the cultural connections which these interactions instigated between the Indian Ocean and Atlantic worlds, and between the two banks of the Hooghly River. Through the efficacy and novelty of creolization, we identify and examine the cultural production emerging from the entry of Europeans into the

Indian Ocean world while also offering a methodology to extrapolate memory work from imaginative texts that refer to the "strange fruits" of those creolizing processes that mark the first phase of European presence in Bengal and that manifest themselves through intermedial entanglements of sensory, material, and textual dimensions.

Mobilizing the memory of such transoceanic and littoral interactions reveals its continuing impress on aspects of culture that, with the passage of time and changes of context, can be unproblematically marshaled into service of cultural purity, nativism, and a concomitant longing for authenticity. In Bengal, as in South Asia more widely, one of the most inimical and intransigent vehicles for articulating (and contesting) claims of authenticity and purity is the category of caste, even as the elusive holy grail of "modernity" is posited as panacea for a range of social ills. References to *sandesh* and *rosogolla* within the nineteenth-century capture of orature into print media, a crucial vehicle for Bengali self-perceptions of modernization under the British Empire, function as an intermedial site of nostalgic memorialization of creole Bengal. Furthermore, the affiliation of these creolized sweets with the performative genre of *kobigaan* is a potent channel for the recollection of creole Bengal as an anti-casteist resource. Its dialogic mode pits the *rosogolla*-like fixity of the confectioner's caste affiliations against the creolized figure of Antony Firingi whose metonymic association with the Hooghly enclaves enhances his *sandesh*-like malleability. Creolization reveals that "authenticity" can reside in cultural innovation and openness to a range of influences brought to Bengal's shores by the seas. Memory work is a tool with which we have probed the complex and often contradictory affects that creolization continues to generate.

The consolidation of British rule and shift of power to Calcutta changed the conditions under which creolization operated – as collective memory registers through activating performances of creolization as improvised, debated and sung cultural exchange. The tightening hold of Empire could not quite override the consequences of earlier movements of diverse people and technologies of culture between the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds. The memory of those movements and their consequences remained affectively important in Bengal – transmuting the *kheer-shagor* of Sanskritized Hindu culture, particularly at moments of its political resurgence, into the curdled and malleable *sandesh* of transoceanic creolization. While the *rosogolla*'s spherical perfection heralds an end-product of that process, the continuing proliferation of *sandesh* mitigates against cultural reification. As we roll against our tongues their varied textures, we sense the ways in which the proclamations of Bhola Moira, confectioner of Bagbazaar, "I don't believe in castes . . . [m]y only salvation lies in Krishna,"[94] do not go in vain; indeed, they are best responded to by playing on the sonic confusion between "Krishno" and "Kristo" ("Krishna" and "Christ") as did Antony Firingi,[95] his sparring partner in creolization's balancing act.

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Notes

1. Banerji, "How the Bengalis Discovered *Chhana*," 48; Chatterjee, "Universe of Bengali Sweets." For a summary of the contestations around chhana's origins, including those between the Indian states of West Bengal and Orissa, see Dey, "Regulating Sweets," 357. A consideration of cross-border modalities of Bengali sweets was not possible within the scope of this article, but it would be an interesting future step to consider the shared heritage of creole Bengal with reference to Bangladesh as well as Indian West Bengal. All translations from Bangla are by the authors unless specified otherwise.
2. Campos, *History of the Portuguese*, 170.
3. This specific understanding of "Recollection" in the context of how creolization is remembered in postcolonial India is elaborated in Kabir, "Creolizing Archipelagic Intimacies."
4. Trouillot, "Culture on the Edges," 9.
5. Goswami, *Desiring India*, 6.
6. See "Sweet Renaissance"; Pal, *Pracheen Kobiwalar Gaan*, 88; Sen, "*Sandesh*," 303; and Dey, "Regulating Sweets," 357–358.
7. As suggested by Markovits in "Political History of Britishness," 55–70. We return to this issue later in the paper.
8. Apter and Derby, "Introduction," in *Activating the Past*, xii-xxx.
9. See Majumdar, *Thakurmar Jhuli*, esp. 225–226.

10. Scholarly compilations and commentaries on Antony and Bhola's *kobigaan* include Pal, *Pracheen Kobiwalar Gaan*, 84–91, 284–353; Lahiri, *Bangalir Gaan*, 185, 194–197. For cinematic retrospections of Antony and Bhola's *kobigaan*, see notes 14 and 19. The implications of the moniker "Firingi" (European) are discussed later in the article.
11. Dey, "Regulating Sweets," 358; See also Dey, "Who Owns Bogurar Doi?"; Dey, "Health, Standardisation, and Bengali Sweets." On the ideological importance of ninteenth-century Bengali cuisine, See Sengupta, "Nation on a Platter"; and Ray, *Culinary Culture*.
12. Banerjee-Dube, "Introduction," 1–2.
13. Kabir, "Creolizing Swirls."
14. A *kobiyal* is a practitioner of the Bengali performance genre *kobigaan*, a "song-contest between two groups of performances with a strong element of debate or logical argument." (Basu, *Poet's Song*, 4, and *passim* for a state-of-the-art account of this genre and its relationship to what she calls ""folk" and its cultural politics in South Asia).

    Regarding Antony: *pace* popular lore, historical accounts are uncertain about his place of birth, but agree upon Antony's Portuguese genealogy, his base in Chandernagore, and his living with a Brahmin widow in the nearby village of Gariti/Geruti. On his "mythic-historic" status, See Basu, *Poet's Song*, 120. See also Lahiri, ed. *Bangalir Gaan*, 194; Pal, ed. *Pracheen Kobiwalar Gaan*, 84; Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*, 707; Banerjee, *A Tale of Two Cities*, 9; Bhaduri, *Polycoloniality*, Chap. 6. Since Antony's maternal line is never quite clarified in these accounts, it is not impossible that it involved Bengali ancestry; and indeed, that racial mixing would be consonant with the biological dimension of creolization as cultural process. In this context, see Sil, "Vocalizing a Eurasian Otherness," 77–78.

    The word "firingi" derives from "Frank" via Arabic "farang," the word used for "European," following the Crusades. It has several equivalents in languages of the Indian Ocean world, including Bahasa Malaya and Indonesia, Thai, Malayalam, Tamil, Urdu, Swahili, and Farsi.
15. See Mukherji, dir. *Jaatishwar*.
16. See Pal, *Pracheen Kobiwalar Gaan*, 88–89; and Sen, "*Sandesh*," 303.
17. On Portuguese words entering Bangla, see Campos, *History of the Portuguese*, 215. On Serampore's establishment by the Danish-Norwegian crown, and its importance for print culture and education in Bengal, see Bhaduri, *Polycoloniality*, "Introduction."
18. Pal, *Pracheen Kobiwalar Gaan*, 39, 86; and Sen, "English Kabiwala," 28–30.
19. Basu, *Poet's Song*, 121, and Ibid., 141–146 for an analysis of the film against a wider study of intermedial transpositions of the *kobiyal* tradition. For the film, see Bandyopadhyay, dir. *Antony Firingi*;
20. See for instance, Campos, *History of the Portuguese*; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, *Improvising Empire*; Bhaduri, *Polycoloniality*; Projit Mukharji, "Feringhee Dharma."
21. See Campos, *History of the Portuguese*, 228; and Bhaduri, *Polycoloniality*, Chap. 2.
22. See for instance, Chaudhuri, ed., *Calcutta*; Banerjee, *Parlour and Streets*; Chaudhuri, "Macaulay's Magic Hat"; Chaudhuri, "Three Poets in Search of History."
23. Lionnet, "Cosmpolitan or Creole Lives."
24. Ivermee, *Hooghly*.
25. Bhaduri, *Polycoloniality*.
26. Ibid., chap. 6.
27. See Kabir, "Elmina as Postcolonial Space," 994–1012; and Kabir, "Creolization as Balancing Act," 135–157.
28. See Kabir, "Beyond Créolité and Coolitude," 174–193.
29. Chaudenson and Mufwene, *Creolization*, Cohen and Toninato, eds. *Creolization Reader*, Berlin, "From Creole to African," Rickford and McWhorter, "Language Contact," Bickerton, "Creole Languages," Rosa, *Portuguese in the Creole Indian Ocean*.
30. Kabir, "Rapsodia Ibero-Indiana."
31. The concept of hybridity was theorized by Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, from British colonial exemplars. On the limitations of syncretism, see Van der Veer, "Syncretism."

32. Campos, *History of the Portuguese*, 204–227; and Bhaduri, *Polycoloniality*, "Introduction," Chaps. 2 and 6.
33. Banerji, "How the Bengalis Discovered *Chhana*," 51, 53, 55; and Achaya, *Indian Food*, 64, 132.
34. Banerji, "How the Bengalis Discovered *Chhana*," 49, 55–56.
35. Ibid., 48–49, 55–56.
36. Ashkenazi, "Cheeses of Hokkaido," 40.
37. For these varieties, see Krondl, "Sweetshops of Kolkata," 58–64; Sen, "*Sandesh*," 300–301, 303, 308; Banerji, "How the Bengalis Discovered *Chhana*," 57–58. Though note that, from 2022 onwards, the West Bengal government's artisanal crafts outlet, Biswa Bangla, is repackaging and commercializing Bandel Cheese as part of Bengal's "Portuguese heritage"; https://indroyc.com/2025/03/27/international-cheese-day-spotlight-bandel-cheese-from-bengal/. (March 27th, 2025);
38. Banerji, "How the Bengalis Discovered *Chhana*," 51–53; and Achaya, *Indian Food*, 132; Chatterjee, "Universe of Bengali Sweets."
39. See Cardoso, "Luso-Asian Comparatives," 81–123; and Kabir, "Creolization as Balancing Act."
40. Achaya, *Indian Food*, 132–133; Banerji, "How the Bengalis Discovered *Chhana*," 51–53, 56–57; and Banerjee, "Mould-Making."
41. Kabir, "Creolization as Balancing Act," 148–149.
42. See Banerji, "How the Bengalis Discovered *Chhana*," 53, 57.
43. See Sen, "*Sandesh*," 305; and Majumdar, "Jolbhora Sandesh."
44. On phases in creolization processes, see Chaudenson and Mufwene, *Creolization*, 124–125.
45. Trouillot, "Culture on the Edges," 15–18.
46. Kabir, "Creolising Swirls."
47. Markovits, "Political History of Britishness," 55–70.
48. Chaudhuri, "Macaulay's Magic Hat," 49; and Also see Bose, "Bengal Tales," 2.
49. Chaudhuri, "Macaulay's Magic Hat," 49.
50. Sengupta, "Nation on a Platter," 82.
51. See Saha, "Historical Mango Varieties,"; Shah, "Alphonso Mangoes,"; Banerji, "How the Bengalis Discovered *Chhana*."; and Also see J.J.A. Campos, *History of the Portuguese*, 109, 118, 207, 253, 256.
52. See Saha, "Historical Mango Varieties."
53. The Alphonso mango was named after Alfonso de Albuquerque, Governor of Portuguese India from 1509–1515. See Shah, "Alphonso Mangoes," Nene, "Mango through Millennia."
54. On the folklore research undertaken by Majumdar, see Sen, *History of Bengali Language and Literature*; Sen, *Folk-Literature*; Ghosh, "Pre-Commercial Era"; and Bandyopadhyay, *Gopal-Rakhal Dialectic*.
55. Majumdar, "Shona Ghumalo," 225–226.
56. Shahed, "Bengali Folk Rhymes," 149, 152; and Daniyal, "Forgotten Indian History."
57. Campos, *History of the Portuguese*, 24; Banerji, "How the Bengalis Discovered *Chhana*," 54; and Bhadhuri, *Polycoloniality*, "Introduction," and chap. 2.
58. See Banerjee, "Mould-Making," Chatterjee, "Universe of Bengali Sweets."
59. The 2018 Bengali film, *Rosogolla* (dir. Pavel) depicts Nabin Chandra Das and his wife, Khirodmoni, poeticizing the *rasa* of the *rosogolla*'s *chandpana* form.
60. See Achaya, *Indian Food*, 132; and Banerji, "How the Bengalis Discovered *Chhana*," 55.
61. On the fractal within creolization, whereby patterning asserts self-similarity through repetition, see the discussion in Kabir's "Creolization as Balancing Act," 137, 147–148.
62. See Moten, *In the Break*, 12.
63. Pollock, *Rasa Reader*, 42.
64. See Pollock, *Rasa Reader*, 12; and Ingalls, Masson, and Patwardhan, trans., *Dhvanyāloka*.
65. The theory of *dhvani* was postulated by Anandavardhana in *Dhvanyāloka* (A.D. 875). See Pollock, *Rasa Reader*, 12. Besides referring to the linguistic modality of

"implicature," the term *dhvani*, has other connotations, including "unlettered sound," "non-linguistic" sound, "voice" (implied/expressed), "tone," "noise," "tune of a musical instrument," and "any audible sound produced in the world." For further details on the various meanings ascribed to *dhvani*, see Dev, *Students' Bengali to English Dictionary*, 494; and Beck, *Sonic Theology*.

66. Pollock, *Rasa Reader*, 12.
67. On "Acoustic Persistence," see Connor, *Dumbstruck*, 3.
68. See Banerji, "How the Bengalis Discovered *Chhana*," 57–58; Achaya, *Indian Food*, 132; and Sen, "*Sandesh*," 304, 308. It is worth noting that unrefined jaggery, not sugar, is a key ingredient of the *nolen gurer kanchagolla.*
69. Banerji, "How the Bengalis Discovered *Chhana*," 57; Krondl, "Sweetshops of Kolkata," 62; and Also see Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked.*
70. See Achaya, *Indian Food*, 132; Banerji, "How the Bengalis Discovered *Chhana*," 58; Krondl, "Sweetshops of Kolkata," 63; and Das, "Sweet Renaissance."
71. See Banerjee, "Mould-Making"; and Sen, "*Sandesh*," 300, 304.
72. Republic TV, "Coronavirus Shaped Sandesh Made in Kolkata."
73. Banerji, "How the Bengalis Discovered *Chhana*," 58.
74. See Fraser, *Book History*, 53–78; and Also see Bhaduri, *Polycoloniality*, "Introduction," and chap. 6.
75. Sengupta, "Nation on a Platter," 91.
76. See Birla, *Stages of Capital.*
77. For the creolized Bengali habitus, Chaudhuri, "Phantasmagorias of the Interior," 173–193.
78. See Taylor, *Archive and Repertoire*, 28, 49.
79. Banerji, "How the Bengalis Discovered *Chhana*," 48–49, 53–56, 58; and See also our comments on Banerjee-Dube above.
80. A similar strategy is seen in Ortiz's *Cuban Counterpoint*, which personifies folkloric performed debates between tobacco and sugar to transmit an allegory of transculturation.
81. Pal, *Pracheen Kobiwalar Gaan*; Lahiri, *Bangalir Gaan*.
82. Basu, *Poet's Song*, 120–173.
83. Pal, *Pracheen Kobiwalar Gaan*, 88–89; and for the *moira* caste of artisanal confectioners, see Dey, "
84. Pal, *Pracheen Kobiwalar Gaan*, 84–87, 284–289; Lahiri, *Bangalir Gaan*, 194–195; Banerjee, *Parlour and Streets*, 99–100; Chaudhuri, "Three Poets," 198–199; Chatterjee, "Who Was Anthony Firinghee?" The films provide strong confirmation of these associations through cinematography and soundtrack; some of Antony's songs take on sonic inflections of the Baul singers, while he is regularly depicted as hanging out with sadhus and fakirs and smoking Ganja together.
85. Ghosh, "Singing," 114, 116–122.
86. "Orey, ami shey Bholanath noi" ("Oh no, I'm not that Bholanath"), said to have been composed in the early nineteenth century, in Pal, *Pracheen Kobiwalar Gaan*, 87–88, 298. Our translation is based on Banerjee's; and See *Parlour and Streets*, 100.
87. See Antony's *kobigaan*, "Je Shakti Hote Utpatti" ("If the female source of energy [Shakti], O Shiva, created you"), in Pal, *Pracheen Kobiwalar Gaan*, 87.
88. See Jain, *Gods in the Bazaar*.
89. Banerji, "How the Bengalis Discovered *Chhana*," 51–53.
90. On kneading *chhana*, see Banerji, "How the Bengalis Discovered *Chhana*," 56; Sen, "*Sandesh*," 304. On sweets that subject the chhana and sugar base to further heat treatment – whether fried, like *pantua*, or boiled in sugar syrup, like *rosogolla;* and See Dey, "Regulating Sweets," 360.
91. Dey, "Regulating Sweets," 370–371.
92. Hence Basu, *Poet's Song*, 143, notes of the 1967 film which tied the persona of Antony firmly to the star actor of Bengali cinema Uttam Kumar: "The Bengali Audience was Particularly Charmed by this Trajectory of Insider-Turned-Outsider in the Film's Narrative."
93. Banerji, "How the Bengalis Discovered Chhana," 48–49.

94. See Bhola's *kobi* song, "Orey, ami shey Bholanath noi" ("Oh no, I'm not that Bholanath"), in Pal, *Pracheen Kobiwalar Gaan*, 87–88; and The translation is from Banerjee, *Parlour and Streets*, 100.
95. See Antony's "Khriste aar Krishne kono probhed nai re bhai" ("There's no difference/ Between Christ and Krishna, dear brother"), in Pal, *Pracheen Kobiwalar Gaan*, 39; and The translation is from Banerjee, *Parlour and Streets*, 99.

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