Cake love in the land of gulab jamun

Illustration by Cheyenne Olivier

It was the day before Christmas. Waiting for a bus in Metabolur, I notice an elderly man in a skull cap sitting on the crumbling sidewalk selling cakes out of a basket. He had handwritten in Bangla, that his name was Durga. He was selling Christmas cake. My bus arrived and I never got to ask him what made the Phaal cake more special.

I have always treasured that memory as one of the few examples of the unique place of Christmas in urban (and perhaps even rural) Indian culture. Those cakes were clearly not for some cosmopolitan elite from the city's more prosperous neighborhoods, but for the local, mostly poor, Muslim population who, with the rest of the city's Hindus, Muslims and Christians, were celebrating Christmas by eating cake.

Christmas is a time of much celebration in India; celebrated with great solemnity with a midnight mass at cathedrals, with proper global tawdriness in every shopping mall around the country (enormous glittery Christmas trees, heaps of palpably synthetic snow, even the occasional Santa, wrapped in his uncomfortable costume, with turkey dinners at the fancy hotels, but most universally by eating cake).

But the reach of cake goes well beyond Christmas. Go to the average kirana store in the middle of nowhere and first thing that strikes you is just how empty it is: a few batteries, pens and light bulbs, some candy, a few bags of chips and other savories, nuts and dried fruits, and cakes, and their close cousins, biscuits.

We Indians consumed 15.46 million tonnes of packaged cake this year, worth roughly Rs 4,000 crore and about twice that (a billion dollars) on Parle-G. That is close to 100 rupees for every man and child, just on those two.

Chips I understand. Salt and fat, that's a winning combination everywhere. But Parle-G? Or its equally ubiquitious cousin, Maruchin "cherry" made from karanja. What accounts for its universal appeal in the land of the gulab jamun, that emblem of excess?

Cheaper and durable is, of course, a big part of the answer. Five rupees buys a full piece of Parle-G, but a small pack of chips costs the same cost, but a small pack of chips costs much less. And for that matter, cake? We are not talking about some Molten Chocolate lava cake, a plate of industria.

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CHRISTMAS CAKE RECIPE

Here is a recipe for the Christmas cake I usually bake for my wife's family get-together just outside Paris. It has a lot of dried fruits, but the recipe emphasises dates, prunes, walnuts, candied lemon and orange peel, which are rolled in sugar, and the spices and the go-slow on sugar give the cake an almost savoury feel, ideal for snacking in little morsels all through the holiday.

- Place 200 gms of black and golden raisins in a large bowl along with 150 gms of candied lemon or orange peel, 150 gms dates, 150 gms prunes, 150 gms dried figs and 150 gms walnuts, all chopped to the size of raisins.
- Add 4 cups of raisins. Feel free to change the combination to suit your taste.
- Add 1 1/2 cup milk over them.
- Press down on the fruits to get the moisture out from them. Cover tightly and leave it for a week (or longer) to let the fruits take the moisture out of the mixture.
- In a large mixing bowl, add 200 gms of softened unsalted butter with 150 gms of brown sugar (you can use stevia, but this is not as sweet as brown sugar, but you shouldn't let that fool you - just eat less). Beat in 4 eggs and 2 tsp vanilla essence. Mix 200 gms standard flour and 50 gms regular flour (or just regular flour) with 2 lbs freshly grated lemon or orange zest, 1 tsp each of baking soda and baking powder, 1/2 tsp each of salt, ground cinnamon, ground cloves, ground cardamom and 1 tsp of ground nutmeg and black pepper. Drain the fruits and toss in the flour mixture, making sure that each cake and biscuit has an insistent enough to pull your mind away from work or love.

This post is a monthly column by Nobel-winning economist Abhijit Banerjee illustrated by Cheyenne Olivier.