

ROSOGOLLA

— by Syed Mujtaba Ali(Translated from the Bengali by Biplob Kishore Deb)

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One of my friends often goes to Europe and America. He goes abroad so often that whenever I see him, there is no way to say whether he is going or coming.

Jhanduda's a businessman. He disembarked from a ship in the port of Venice in Italy. After giving *honest* replies to all the questions on the customs forms, Jhanduda wrote at the end "a tin container of vacuum packed sweets, price: ten taka."

Jhanduda's luggage is covered with so many labels from different hotels that any customs agent could understand that this person lives the life of a nomad—moving from hotel to hotel. But that day, the customs agent started checking everything carefully like a first grade boy reading a book with spelling mistakes. His appearance was unpleasant too—very thin and sickly, a person with broken cheeks.

The customs officer asked, "What's in that tin container?"

"Sweets."

"Open it."

"How is that possible? I am taking it to London. It will be utterly spoiled if I open it." The customs agent looked at Jhanduda furiously; apparently that indicated the command for Jhanduda to open the tin—even a king could not enforce such an order by beating five hundred drums.

With sorrowful eyes, Jhanduda pleaded, "Brother, I am carrying this tin for my friend's daughter in London. If I open it, it will be ruined."

But this time, the customs agent looked at Jhanduda in such a way as if he heard the sound of a thousand drums beating.

Mighty Jhanduda asked him dejectedly, with the eyes of an ant, "Then will you please send the tin to London through the postal service? I'm able to receive it there."

But surprisingly, the customs agent did not agree even to this idea. We all tried to make the butcher understand that Jhanduda's proposal was very reasonable and legitimate. The customs agent did not bother with it and acted as if he didn't understand a single language in the world.

Jhanduda became angry. He mumbled to himself, "Well, I'll open it. But you cannot go without tasting it."

After that, he told the agent in English, "But you'll have to taste it yourself."

The villain had brought out a can opener. Before he began cutting, Jhanduda again repeated, "You'll have to taste it yourself, I'm telling you."

The customs agent gave a laugh as if his lips had become dry from a winter cold.

Jhanduda finally cut open the tin container.

What came out? *Rosogolla*. Without caring for a spoon, Jhanduda distributed sweets first among the Bengalis, then the Indians, then all the French, Germans, Italians, and Spanish.

The whole customs house then was tasting sweets. The whole room was juicy. From the armed police to the liveried servants of customs house—everyone was eating sweets.

Meanwhile, Jhanduda, pushing his pot-belly to the counter, asked the customs agent, "Please taste a sweet." A juicy sweet was in his hand.

The customs agent jerked his neck back slightly and became scared. But Jhanduda is an obstinate person. He moved toward the agent and told him again, "Please look, everybody is eating. Please taste and find out yourself what a good dessert this is."

The customs agent jerked his neck back again. The man was stone-hearted. He did not even bother with a courteous "No thank you."

Suddenly without any notice, Jhanduda grasped his shirt's collar with the grip of his left hand, and, with his right hand, he flattened a white syrupy spherical cheese ball of *rosogolla* on the customs agent's nose and told him in a loud voice, "You will not eat?! You have to eat. Idiot, you are joking with me! I tried to make you understand that if the containers were opened, the sweets would be spoiled. But you didn't care."

By this time, the whole area of the customs house had turned into a tumultuous state. This was not unexpected because roughing up a customs official is an illegal activity. Most of the time, the guilty person is sent to prison.

Five or six of us tried to get Jhanduda away from the counter. He was shouting repeatedly, "You do not eat, oh! My sweet heart, you do not eat." The customs agent was calling for the police in a faint voice. But no police were there. What a blessing! Everyone—including the armed guards, soldiers, messengers, captains, servants—was completely invisible.

By this time, after a hard struggle, we were able to pull Jhanduda away from the counter. Seeing the customs agent wiping the flattened sweets from his face, Jhanduda shouted, "Do not wipe, it will be evidence for the court."

Someone from the crowd suggested that Jhanduda flee before the police arrived.

Jhanduda replied, "No, let him call, let his officer come."

Within three minutes, forcing his way through the crowd, the officer came. Jhanduda asked the officer, "Before starting the investigation, please taste a sweet," and then Jhanduda himself took a sweet and distributed them among us for the second time. The officer took one and closed his eyes for two and a half minutes. Keeping his eyes closed, the officer extended his hand for another piece of sweet—then again and again.

The tin container full of *rosogolla* became empty.

The customs agent complained to the officer.

The officer said, "It was very good that you opened the container, otherwise how could we taste it?" Looking at us, the officer said, "Why are you standing here? Go and bring more sweets." As we were leaving the room we actually heard the officer telling the agent, "You really are stupid. You forced him to open the tin, but did not taste the juicy sweet."

I started singing:

*Hi juicy Bangla ball,
sweetness we love to savour
Italians forget their duties,
surrender to your flavour.*

