Edible Food Art: Goyna Bori

A Photoessay

by

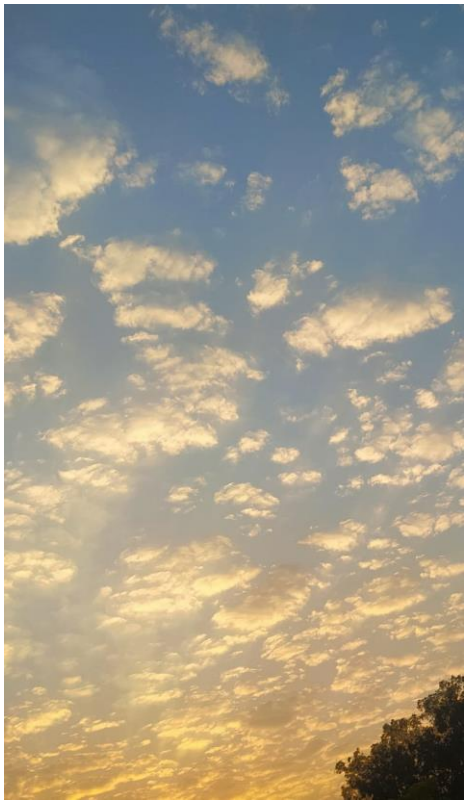
Moumita Pari Giri

A *Goyna* (or, *Gohona*) *Bori* or *Noksha Bori* is a sun-dried lentil dumpling intricately shaped like a piece of jewelry or ornament (*Goyna* or *Gohona*, in Bangla). Dumpling is, however, a clear misnomer for *boris* are neither steamed nor stuffed with fillings as is often the case with, say, the Chinese zongzi, the Japanese gyoza or the Nepali & Tibetan momo. Instead, *Goyna boris* belong to the broader class of *boris* that were traditionally prepared with freshly-ground lentils by women in rural or suburban (mostly) Bengali households in India.



A process that calls for considerable time and skill, *bori* making has now been commercialized. The average *bori* lover now procures her *boris* from the grocer's or from the supermarket. Only in a handful households are *boris* still 'given'– in Bengali you don't 'make' *boris* but 'give' them as in, you lay them out on the sunny terrace or the forecourt of your house. *Bori* making is, quite sadly, a dying art. The *Goyna bori* has its origin in Bengal's Midnapore district where women would craft these exquisite edible wonders every winter (late winter, actually), to be cherished yearlong.

Here's my story on the design of *Goyna bori* for a special occasion.



Blue sky is always soothing to the eyes, but blue sky with puffy white clouds, tenderly touched by the sunlight of an August sky, is truly mystical. On one such beautiful August noon, I was coming home after seeing my son off at his school. I remembered how much he loves candy floss to the point of being almost rebellious to have at least one after his school was over. Then looking at the sky I wondered, doesn't a candy floss resemble a small piece of the beautiful August sky? Oh yes, why not take a different perspective to see how human beings might have been inspired by the puffy clouds, beyond our reach, to recreate its essence in a candy floss, as an edible piece of cloud that we cannot touch. Well, to me it seemed like a simplified form of food art inspired by nature's beautiful motifs – the puffy clouds of an August sky. But the idea of replicating beautiful things in life into edible items got into my head.

Alright, they say "Sky's the limit," but what if it isn't? As a librarian I have the privilege of getting my hands on books on diverse kinds of subjects, ranging from history to high-tech to art & design, to help nourish my curiosity to know more and more about anything or everything. During one such curiosity drives of mine, I got hold of a book with the title, *Culinary Culture in Colonial India: A Cosmopolitan Platter and the Middle-Class* written by Utsa Ray. It immediately caught my attention as I had always wanted to know more about my roots to remain grounded in life. This book, as it turned out, had a section dedicated to the inimitable *Goyna bori* of Bengal.

Although, it was not an entirely new concept to me since as a local person hailing from the district of Midnapore, I had seen my mother (and grandmother) often doing this beautiful food art, time and again. However, I was not too sure how good I could myself be in replicating the beautiful patterns that I always got attracted to, into the design and layout of my *Goyna boris*.



Well, you don't know how good you could play until you are in the game! Therefore, I decided to make *Goyna boris* on my son's birthday in the month of October. However, a constraint immediately dampened my spirits a little – for the *Goyna boris* to dry properly, right to the core, one will need the mellow sunlight of fairly dry and cool weather. Typically, this kind of weather is briefly found during the latter half of January and through most of February in my part of the world. But my son's birthday was in October. Thus, I had few experimental approaches in my mind to try my hand at making *Goyna boris* even during the fairly hot and humid month of October.

I always had the inclination to try things differently than what is normative. So, I thought of exploring the scientific basis of dry climate with mellow sunlight and try creating the same artificially with the goal of making *Goyna boris* for my son's birthday in the month of October. I found one corner window of my bedroom that was west facing and had large panes of reflecting glasses.



I felt that if delicate indoor plants could thrive by the window sill then it might be possible to replicate the 'mellow sunlight' even in the month of October by that window in my bedroom which also has one Air Conditioning unit to act as a dehumidifier. I was naturally very excited with the possibility of making *Goyna boris* for my son's birthday in October. I quickly laid down a few designs of my choice by piping the batter onto a large metal plate and arranged it by that window in my bedroom. I waited for the *Goyna boris* to dry for a whole week before attempting to lift them off the metal plate. However, much to my dismay I found that the *Goyna boris* made this way were merely surface dry, which meant that they would not be crunchy when fried.

Oh, the endless spiral of life, I thought as I stood in front of a *Jalebi* or *Jilipi* (originally a Persian/ Turkish delicacy but quite popular in the subcontinent) stall, waiting to buy evening snacks for the family. But the question that kept nagging me was: how could I make *Goyna boris* for my beloved son's birthday which is in the month of October? The simple answer – that one could buy it, of course – didn't please me; I wanted to make the beautiful *boris* myself for my dear boy as a special treat. The spiral of life as it grows brought the very significant question to my mind – how the choices we make or don't make the spiral of life grow into eternity! I thought, how about trying the same method as used in making *Jalebis* to create *Goyna boris*? It would be a difficult task as I would have to pipe the batter directly into the hot oil for direct frying, quickly replicating the decorative designs I had in my mind.

Notwithstanding the challenges, I tried this same method (of making *Jalebis*) in making my unseasonal *Goyna boris* right in the month of October. My experiment was partially successful, as I could get past the constraints of specific weather conditions needed for making the *real* thing. But two compromises had to be made in the process. Firstly, it was not possible to lay out the exact decorative designs I had in mind while piping the batter into hot oil. Secondly, the resultant fritters could not really be called *Goyna boris* as they were already fried and couldn't be stored without the possibility of generating trans-fat while reheating. Alas, I couldn't make the real *Goyna boris* on my son's birthday!

With a degree of heaviness in my heart about my somewhat failed attempts at making beautiful *Goyna boris* for my son on his birthday, I kept moving through the daily chores of life. But the whole idea of recreating beautiful patterns in life and nature through edible food art didn't get out of my head. But as the saying goes that good things have their own 'right' time, I had to wait for the month of February to make real *Goyna boris* of the finest designs I could imagine.









Finally, the month of February arrived and I decided to make *Goyna boris* – this time, the *real* stuff! I replicated the ornate patterns as seen in traditional jewelry design in Bengal and voila! My *boris* turned out exactly like the decorative pendants and tiaras, straight out of a *meenakari* jewelry box – but *edible* ones! Although I couldn't make real *Goyna boris* on my son's birthday, I presented my edible food art in the form of crunchy *Goyna boris* before my entire family, to be relished as a starter during the lunch of Vasant Panchami (a local Bengali festival that falls in late January or early February).

Of course, I didn't forget my original motivation to make *Goyna boris* for my son's birthday in October. So, I put away the best of the lot in an airtight glass jar (my own special jewelry box, if you please), stowing it away in a cool and dark corner of the kitchen. I could fry these whenever I wanted. No more heartbreaks in October!

For the uninitiated but curious minds, here's an overview of the complex process of making the ornate *Goyna boris*.

Split Black Gram (local names: *biuli* or *kolai* or *urad*) *dal* (lentil) has to be soaked overnight and then ground into a fine paste with a traditional grinding tool or the *Shil Nora*. The ground lentil would then be hand beaten into a light, fluffy batter. Matriarchs often schooled awkward initiates with handy tips and tricks: 'girl, you know the batter's done when a drop of it stays afloat on water instead of sinking…' In time, the greenhorns, too, would mature in skill and artistry.

The batter would then have to be poured into a thick cotton cloth (the *bori* cloth) with a hole in the middle to accommodate a nozzle (no fancy nozzle though, just a plain one). The batter would then be piped on to *Kulos* (traditional winnowing fans) or flatware covered with poppy seeds or white sesame seeds. The skilled *bori* maker would hardly falter, moving on from one elaborate *bori* to the next with spellbinding swiftness and control – bringing to her designs a fine artisanal flair.

One by one, floral overlays, flamboyant vines, peacock motifs, delicate tiaras, and filigreed armlets would bloom on the *kulo*. All these must be done outdoors, well before noon. *Boris*, like gardens, are not made in the shade! (I learned it the hard way, huh!)



At the time of laying out the *boris*, it should be sunny and cool. The *boris* would have to be completely sun-dried (2-3 days) and then stored in airtight jars.

The *Goyna bori*, just like its other plainer siblings, is fried in mustard or refined oil until golden brown and served (with *dal*) as a savory starter in a traditional Bengali meal.

[Text by ***Sujoy Sarkar***]



Moumita Pari Giri [Ph.D., Library Science] is a librarian at the Haldia Institute of Technology in India's West Bengal. After coming home from work, she enjoys spending time with her family and exploring her passion for cooking. She loves trying out new things and experimenting with food. The subtly-flavored, intricate *Goyna boris* are her specialty; she tries out different designs each year, pairing traditional and modern motifs in new and interesting combinations. She uses her skills in cooking and food design to chalk out immersive culinary experiences to the delight of her family and friends. Moumita believes in imbuing the familiar and the homey with what she calls 'a touch of *my own*,' always transforming a simple meal to one that's special in its own right.