

Bombay Duck - duck or a fish

Much remains hidden in the names, names of an avenue, names of cross-roads, names of cuisines, names of artifacts, names of villages. Sometime the antiquity of names goes back deep in the history and left little-changed over the time. Our biological-cultural heritages also flaunt such a diversity of vernacular names, the heirloom rice we eat or local landrace of vegetable or a nondescript herb, many a time the name associate with the place of origin or special feature of the biota or sometimes the name could be earned through other routes which may have a much lustrous cultural historic connotation.

The name Bomaby Duck tickle our imagination in that sense! A species of lizardfish, *Harpadon nehereus* which is most famous as the Bombay duck throughout the western coast. An abundant species across the Indo-Pacific is available from both the coastal regions of India. The body is slimy with an average size of 25 cm but adults may attain a length of 40 cm. Though cooked and eaten as fried or curried, it is one of species often consumed as salted and dried. Very popular among Indians from Bengal, southern Gujarat, coastal Maharashtra, Goa, and Karnataka, it is also quite favorite among Bangladeshis as well.



All is well, but why duck? It does not fly like one! And that too from Bombay while it is found in tonnes throughout the Indian coast! So, there are stories but not conclusive ones, so might take with a pinch of salt.

One story attaches it to the transportation of the dried fish by early Indian mail train in the days of the British Raj. Perhaps, the strong smell of the dried fish became synonymous with the mail train (the Bombay Daak). But critiques say the word could be older than the earliest railroad in Bombay. The other story pulls Robert Clive into the scene saying he was the first person to use the term and later popularized in the Indian restaurants in the UK. It somewhat goes like this: presumably Robert had tasted a piece on his sojourn to Bengal and compared with the smell with that of the newspaper and mail delivered in the cantonments from Bombay.

We do not know the true one, but that does not matter much here, even the wrong one has become a part of the story; and stories are what we are always love to listen. So, name is a not merely a name, it is much more - a slice of our world!

Photo source: Hamid Badar Osmany, fishbase.in

Collector: Avik Ray