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DIET

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The silver foil on your Indian sweet may well have been pounded between leather sheets

Love that silver foil covering your delectable sweets? True, varak, as it is called, surely does make for a pretty presentation, though it doesn't actually add to the taste, or does it? Recently, Maneka Gandhi, India's environmental minister and animal rights activist, has revealed some distressing details about varak production.

"It is made," she said in an Indian magazine, "by placing thin metal sheets of silver between several layers of bullock intestines (cleaned of blood and feces) which have been bound together, and pounding them." The resulting product has residue of the intestines pounded into it, she said. A few years ago, Indian Airlines stopped serving varak-wrapped mithai on their flights, as it was nonvegetarian.

Hinduism Today did its own investigation, purchasing some varak sweets at a shop in California and shipping them to ABC Research Corporation in Florida. While they said the sample was too small for a conclusive test, their analysis was negative for the presence of beef antigens. None could be seen on the

silver under their microscope. Perhaps this varak was made in some other fashion. We also asked Jagdish Agarwal of Dinodia Picture Agency in Mumbai to take photos of varak production. The Mumbai varak makers did not use intestines, but pounded the silver between leather sheets (photo above).

By Indian economics, varak is not inexpensive, costing about a rupee a sheet (about ^{us}2 cents). But, as Maneka Gandhi wrote, it adds status to the product and is now being used to wrap expensive fruits, such as apples. The best advice for veggies is to avoid varak until there is a certified vegetarian version.