6.1: Street Foods of India

Street food occupies a distinctive place in Indian food culture — inexpensive, accessible, and deeply regional, often serving as the most visible and widely experienced expression of a city or region's food identity. This chapter examines the characteristics, regional variety, and significance of street food in India, connecting to themes of regional diversity and culinary diffusion.

6.2 Defining Street Food

Street food refers to ready-to-eat food and beverages prepared and/or sold by vendors in streets, markets, and other public spaces, typically at low cost, and often consumed immediately at or near the point of sale.

Distinguishing characteristics:

- Prepared and sold in informal, often mobile or semi-permanent settings (carts, small stalls, roadside setups).

- Generally low-cost and accessible across social and economic groups.

- Often specific to a particular locality, city, or even a specific vendor known for a signature preparation.

- Prepared fresh, often to order, with visible preparation forming part of the appeal for many consumers.

6.3 Regional Street Food Traditions

North India (particularly Delhi and Uttar Pradesh):

Chaat varieties (a broad category of savoury, tangy snacks including golgappa/pani puri, aloo tikki chaat, and papdi chaat), kachori, and various chaat-adjacent preparations combining fried elements, chutneys, and spices.

Mumbai/Maharashtra:

Vada pav, pav bhaji (a spiced vegetable mash served with bread), bhel puri (a puffed rice-based chaat variant), and misal pav.

West Bengal (particularly Kolkata):

Jhal muri (spiced puffed rice), kathi rolls (paratha-wrapped fillings), and phuchka (the Bengali variant of golgappa/pani puri).

South India:

Regional street food traditions vary by city — for instance, distinctive chaat adaptations and snack varieties found in cities such as Bangalore and Chennai, alongside more universally recognized South Indian snack foods (murukku, banana chips) sold in street and market settings.

Other notable regional street foods: momos (particularly associated with Northeast India and now widely popular in North Indian cities), and various region-specific fried and grilled snacks across the country.

6.4 Street Food and the Chaat Category

Chaat deserves particular attention as one of the most iconic categories of Indian street food:

- The term broadly refers to a category of savoury snacks characterized by a combination of fried or crisp elements, boiled potatoes or chickpeas, yogurt, tangy tamarind and mint/coriander chutneys, and a mix of spices.

- Golgappa/pani puri (crisp hollow shells filled with spiced water, potato, and chickpea filling) is among the most widely recognized chaat items across India, known by different regional names (golgappa, puchka/phuchka, gup chup, pani puri, depending on the region).

- Chaat exemplifies several themes from this textbook: strong regional variation in naming and specific preparation combined with near-universal recognition across India .

6.5 Street Food and Food Safety Considerations

Street food occupies an important but complex position from a food safety standpoint:

- Informal preparation settings can present food safety challenges, including water quality (particularly relevant for items like golgappa/pani puri, which involve spiced water), hygiene of preparation surfaces, and ingredient freshness.

- Government and municipal efforts in various Indian cities have worked toward street food vendor registration, training, and hygiene certification programs to address these concerns while preserving the accessibility and cultural value of street food.

- This tension — between the cultural and economic significance of street food and legitimate food safety considerations — is relevant to food science and food policy discussions.

6.6 Economic and Social Significance of Street Food

- Street food vending provides significant livelihood opportunities, particularly for small-scale, often family-run vendors across Indian cities.

- Street food serves as an accessible entry point for food entrepreneurship, with some street food businesses eventually scaling into larger restaurant or commercial food ventures.

- Street food culture reflects and reinforces regional and city-specific food identity, often becoming a point of local pride and a draw for food tourism.

- Street food has increasingly been recognized and promoted as part of India's culinary heritage, including through media coverage, food tourism initiatives, and, in some cases, formal recognition efforts.

6.7 Connection to Commercial Production

As with traditional snacks and sweets discussed earlier, several street food items have been adapted for packaged, commercial production (e.g., packaged bhel puri mixes, ready-to-eat chaat components).

7.1: IPR Issues in Traditional Foods

As traditional Indian foods have gained national and international recognition and moved into commercial production, questions of intellectual property rights (IPR) have become increasingly significant. This chapter introduces the key IPR concepts relevant to traditional foods, the specific challenges traditional and indigenous food knowledge poses to conventional IPR frameworks, and notable examples relevant to India.

7.2 Why Traditional Foods Raise IPR Questions

Traditional food knowledge — recipes, processing techniques, and traditional crop varieties — presents unique challenges for intellectual property frameworks because:

- Traditional knowledge is typically developed collectively, over generations, within communities, rather than by a single identifiable inventor — making it difficult to fit within IPR frameworks designed around individual or corporate inventorship.

- Such knowledge has often been freely shared and passed down within and sometimes beyond communities, without formal documentation, making it vulnerable to being claimed as "novel" by external parties who patent it without acknowledging its traditional origin.

- Commercial actors (domestic or international) may seek to patent products, processes, or even genetic material derived from traditional knowledge, potentially restricting the very communities

who developed and maintained that knowledge from using it freely, or requiring them to pay licensing fees for what was historically their own practice.

7.3 Key IPR Concepts Relevant to Traditional Foods

Patents:

Legal protection granted for novel, non-obvious inventions, giving the patent holder exclusive rights to the invention for a defined period. Patents are the most contentious IPR category in relation to traditional knowledge, since traditional knowledge is by definition pre-existing and not "novel" in patent law terms — however, this has not always prevented improper patenting attempts, as discussed below.

Geographical Indications (GI):

A form of IPR that identifies a product as originating from a specific geographic region, where a given quality, reputation, or characteristic of the product is essentially attributable to that origin. GI protection is particularly relevant and useful for traditional foods, as it protects the collective right of producers within a region to use a name associated with their traditional product, without granting exclusive rights over the underlying recipe or process itself.

Traditional Knowledge (TK) documentation and databases:

Efforts to formally document traditional knowledge (including food-related knowledge) in searchable databases, primarily to serve as prior art that can be cited to prevent improper patent claims over knowledge that is demonstrably pre-existing and traditional.

7.4 Notable Case: Basmati Rice

One of the most significant and widely cited IPR cases relevant to Indian traditional food is the basmati rice case:

- In 1997, an American company was granted a patent related to certain rice lines and grains, including claims that referenced or overlapped with characteristics associated with basmati rice — a long-grain aromatic rice variety with deep historical and cultural roots in the Indian subcontinent.

- This raised significant concern in India (and Pakistan) regarding the potential for this patent to affect the ability of traditional basmati-growing regions and farmers to market their rice internationally under the basmati name, and regarding the appropriation of what was considered a traditionally and collectively developed crop variety.

- Following formal opposition, several of the patent's broader claims were narrowed or invalidated, illustrating both the vulnerability of traditional agricultural/food knowledge to patenting and the importance of formal opposition mechanisms in protecting it.

- This case became a significant reference point in India's subsequent development of Geographical Indication protections and traditional knowledge documentation efforts.

7.5 India's Response: The Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL)

In response to concerns illustrated by cases such as basmati rice (and similar cases involving other traditional knowledge, such as turmeric's wound-healing properties), India developed the Traditional Knowledge Digital Library (TKDL):

- A database documenting traditional knowledge (including traditional medicine and, relevantly, traditional food-related knowledge) in a format accessible to international patent offices.

- Its primary purpose is to provide accessible prior art documentation, enabling patent examiners internationally to identify when a patent application overlaps with pre-existing traditional knowledge, helping to prevent improper patents from being granted in the first place.

7.6 Geographical Indication (GI) Protection for Indian Traditional Foods

India has registered numerous traditional food products under GI protection, recognizing their specific regional origin and traditional character. Examples relevant to food include specific regional varieties and traditional food products where a particular region's name is legally protected in connection with that product's identity and reputation.

Significance of GI protection for traditional foods:

- Protects the collective right of producers within the recognized region to use the associated name, preventing producers outside that region (domestically or internationally) from marketing similar products under the same protected name.

- Does not grant any single individual or company exclusive ownership of the underlying recipe or process — the protection is collective and geographically bound, distinguishing it meaningfully from patent protection.

- Can support the economic value and market recognition of traditional regional foods, connecting to the commercial production themes.

7.7 Ongoing Challenges

- Balancing the goal of protecting traditional knowledge from improper external appropriation with the goal of not overly restricting the natural, ongoing evolution and sharing of food traditions within and across communities.

- Difficulty of assigning IPR protection to knowledge that has been openly shared across community and even national boundaries over long periods of history.

- Ensuring that GI and other protections meaningfully benefit the traditional communities and producers involved, rather than being captured primarily by larger commercial interests.

- International variation in how IPR frameworks handle traditional knowledge, given differing national laws and enforcement capacity.