Chaat: Why India's Beloved Snack is Also a Feat of the Imagination

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Until the COVID-19 pandemic caused a widespread disruption of urban lives, here is a scene that played out in almost identical fashion across Indian cities. Shortly before dusk, as offices closed for the day, hungry professionals and students disgorged from buildings and huddled at street corners in small groups. Usually, they could be found surrounding a street food vendor with a pushcart.

From a distance, it would seem as if the vendor held their rapt attention like a conductor overseeing an orchestra. His quicksilver hands chopped, tossed, mixed, squeezed, and muddled ingredients with a practised ease. In just a few moments, the famished onlookers would have been handed different kinds of *chaat* – sweet-sour-spicy plates of snacks, crowned with a flourish of crunchy toppings. For a few minutes, the clamour of waiting would be replaced with the complete sensory pleasure of eating a plate (or several) of *chaat*.

Widely believed to have been derived from the Hindi / Urdu word *chaatna*, which means to devour or lick clean with one's fingers, *chaat* refers to a genre of savoury snacks that are popular both in India, and in neighbouring countries such as Pakistan, Nepal and Bangladesh.[1] There are several theories regarding its origins, including a widely cited story that Mughal emperor Shah Jahan's chief physician ordered the royal cooks to create foods laden with spices to counter a cholera outbreak.[2] Another popular story suggests that *chaat* may have been created as safeguard against the highly polluted waters of the River Yamuna.

Even though there is little definitive proof that either of these stories has a factual basis, there is evidence to suggest that *chaat* – or at least early versions of it – have been a part of the Indian diet since at least the eleventh century. Colleen Taylor Sen writes about some of the recipes mentioned in the *Manasollasa,* a Sanskrit composition in verse by King Somesvara III, a twelfth-century ruler of southwest India.[3] Even though they are now known by different names, some of the dishes mentioned in the *Manasollasa* could be considered forerunners of ingredients used in modern-day *chaat.*

Sen writes:

> Lentil or chickpea flour mixed with asafoetida, salt, sugar, ground black pepper, cardamom and water was ground into a paste, formed

> into little discs and deep-fried to make *purika*, a forerunner of modern papdi (round crispy wafers used in the popular street food papdi chaat). A fermented paste of ground urad dal and black pepper was shaped into balls and deep-fried to make *vadika*, which was soaked in milk or yoghurt. A modern incarnation of this is the popular Indian street food dahi vada – fried spicy lentil balls smothered with fresh yoghurt and topped with ground cumin, other spices and a sweet-and-sour chutney'.[4]

Like other time honoured Indian culinary traditions, *chaat* has not just survived but also extended far beyond its traditionally defined contours to become a nationwide phenomenon. Through this paper, I assert that even though *chaat* is often subsumed within the larger and more generic category of street food, it should also be seen as – and its popularity attributed to – a feat of the imagination.

Although it may seem like a random assortment of ingredients, thrown together by the experienced hand of a *chaatwallah* (or purveyor of *chaat*), a good plate of *chaat* demands an imaginative yet intuitive understanding of colours, flavours, temperatures, and textures, and how they can be stacked and interplayed to create a memorable mouthful.

I also argue that imagination, as it pertains to *chaat*, should not just be interpreted literally. With a multitude of iterations of the same dish, made with similar ingredients but distinguished by regional inflections, *chaat* challenges the reductive notion of a pan-Indian uniformity when it comes to cuisine and taste preferences. At the same time, it also serves as a link that demonstrates the elemental appeal of the trifecta of sweet-sour-spicy flavours and the ways in which they are expressed in different parts of the country (and the subcontinent).

Disguise or design?

Although there are simply too many types of *chaat* to list, the most popular kinds usually follow a 'formula' of sorts. This includes a crunchy, deep-fried element, such as hollow spherical *puris* made of semolina, atta or refined flour, *papdis* or thin, wafer-like discs, or samosas; a tangy-sweet chutney made of dates or tamarind; a spicy chutney made of fresh coriander leaves and mint leaves; and flavouring agents such as *chaat masala*, a blend of freshly roasted and powdered spices that adds an earthy kick. Apart from these, *chaat* also calls for ingredients that lend heft and body, such as boiled chickpeas, potatoes and dried peas, diced onions and tomatoes, crisp *sev* (or thin, deep-fried noodles made of gram flour) and unsweetened yoghurt.

The predilection for deep-fried, carb-heavy ingredients as building blocks for *chaat* has given it a reputation of being unwholesome 'fast food'. But if you are willing to temporarily put aside questions of how these individual elements are prepared, it becomes clear that *chaat* was never meant to be a pure vehicle for indulgence. Traditionally, it was an imaginative and carefully calibrated way to soothe stomachs and aid digestion, especially during the

change of seasons. Food writer Anoothi Vishal notes how it is not a mere coincidence that the *pani* (or flavoured water) used in *golgappas* (hollow *puris* filled with potatoes, chickpeas or stewed dried peas and fiery *pani*) is laden with coriander and mint leaves, and spices such as *zeera* (cumin) and *hing* (or asafoetida).

> 'Long thought to have curative powers, the cumin-laced water (without bolder spices like chillies but often with other therapeutic ingredients like *hing* was given to lactating mothers and those whose digestion needed a kick, especially as the weather turned warm in the Indo-Gangetic plain. (It is more than a coincidence that the *chaat* season began with Holi in spring and continued through the long summer.) Because *pudina* (mint) was thought to be cooling, a fistful of dried, crushed leaves would be added to the therapeutic *jal zeera*'.[5]

Chaat – at least in its most elemental form – was created with an eye on good health. Its clever packaging of health-giving properties in patently delicious disguise is among its most imaginative feats.

One *chaat*, many iterations

Chaat is often believed to have originated in the northern Indian state of Uttar Pradesh.[6] Cities in UP such as the state capital Lucknow, Varanasi and Prayagraj boast a robust *chaat* culture furthered equally by entrepreneurs who have been in the trade for generations, and customers who are discerning about quality and flavour.

Here, in what we can be considered the heartland of traditional *chaat*, it is often made to an exacting standard. The *aloo tikkis* (round or heart-shaped potato patties, sometimes stuffed with *matara* or white peas or fresh green peas) I tried in Lucknow during a visit in early 2020, were unlike those I had eaten anywhere else. Fried in ghee, they were shatter crisp yet far from stodgy, offering the unalloyed pleasure of creamy, well-cooked potatoes, topped with a dollop of yoghurt and *saunth*, or a sweet chutney flavoured with dried ginger.

But the versatility of *chaat* means that *aloo tikki* has long crossed state lines and acquired nationwide popularity. (The scope of this paper doesn't extend to northeastern India, which has significantly different dietary habits from the rest of the country). The complexion of the dish varies depending on where you eat it. For instance, in the Chembur locality of Mumbai with a significant population of the Sindhi community, the same potato patties are likely to be stuffed with *chana dal* and served with tamarind and coriander chutneys.

Perhaps the best example of *chaat*'s shape-shifting adaptability is *pani puri*. The dish goes by different names across the country; the change in geography also translates to subtle differences in its flavour profile. To illustrate, *pani ke batashe* in Delhi means flatter

puris made of *atta* or semolina stuffed with spiced potatoes and sour-spicy water whereas in Mumbai, *pani puri* implies semolina or refined flour *puris* stuffed with boiled peas or sprouts and a balanced mix of sweet and spicy chutneys. In Bangarpet in South India, which boasts its own unique spin-offs of *chaat*, *pani puri* may come with hearty boiled, dried peas and the heady kick of garlic-scented water.

Bengaluru resident Ajit Bhaskar, a physicist with an avid interest in food and cooking, told me about the nuances that separate the city's *chaat* scene from that of other cities. He mentioned that the name Bengaluru is in fact derived from the Kannada phrase, 'bendha kaala ooru' (or the town of boiled beans). 'Traditionally, the weather in Bengaluru used to be cool all year round. So boiled beans provided comfort food.'[7] True to its name, dried and stewed beans and peas feature in many versions of the city's *chaat*, including *masaal puri*, an iconic regional dish that features spicy peas stuffed into *puris*, topped with finely chopped onions, tomatoes and coriander leaves.

In this way, *chaat* resists narrow definitions of ownership to any state or community. Even when it is tempting to pin it down to a place, such as the world-famous *bhel puri* to the city of Mumbai, one is reminded that *bhel puri*, too, came about from a mélange of cultural influences. As the well-known food writer Vikram Doctor was quoted as saying:

> 'It's rooted in the mixing together of two culinary trends…the puffed rice snacks that are popular in the south and east, such as Kolkata's *jhal muri*, and the chaat ingredients from the country's north'.[8]

The street and the showman

Imaginative not just in its physical expression, *chaat* also necessitates a certain rhythm and quality of interaction between the *chaatwallah* and his customers. Often bearers of a legacy that has been passed down from generation to generation, *chaatwallahs* learn the nuances of the trade through observation and experience. But ultimately, even though carefully calibrated and an eye on quality can ensure a degree of success, the *chaatwallah* also needs to sharpen an equally – if not more – important prerequisite for success. Constantly vying with other vendors, attractions and distractions on the streets, *chaatwallahs* must have a flair for showmanship.

Chaiwallahs cannot be aloof or distant if they expect to hold their audience in rapt attention. This is why some of the country's most famous *chaatwallahs* have an almost theatrical quality, calling out to customers with distinct tunes or juggling plates of *dahi vada* overhead, as the proprietor of Indore's Joshi Dahi Vada (also called the 'Flying Vada House') is famous for doing. In this way, a *chaatwallah* bridges the artistic distance that

often separates a chef from his clients, even in the most intimate of settings. The *chaatwallah* draws you into his periphery as you await your turn. In turn, the feedback is provided in real time and the tweaks to the dish made accordingly.

In this interaction between a showman and his audience, the street also has a significant part to play. On the one hand, the spectacle of *chaat* effectively converts a shared experience in a public space to a private one. On the other hand, the public nature of the process in turn contributes an air of liveliness to the street. As Harris Solomon notes:

> 'If the street is both the substance and site of food processing, as I argue here, then it cannot only be understood as a location for food's consumption... Studies of street food tend to cast the street as the bit part, with food as the charismatic lead. This approach leaves the street's transformative potential underexamined'.

I argue that *chaat* is the conduit for a more joyful experience of the streets, especially against the backdrop of the deep socioeconomic divides of the subcontinent. In that moment when one waits in a tight circle around a *chaatwallah*, awaiting the next round of *pani puri* or *phuchka* on our plates, the street is a powerful equalizing force. In this way, *chaat* becomes imperative to the democratic experience of street life, particularly in the Indian context.

Notes

1. Laura Siciliano Rosen, 'Chaat' , Britannica, 2014 <https://www.britannica.com/topic/chaat >
2. Roshni Subramaniam, 'Chaats From Around India You Cannot Miss!', *Outlook Traveller,* September 5 2019 <https://www.outlookindia.com/outlooktraveller/explore/story/69834/chaats-from-around-india-that-you-cannot-miss>
3. Colleen Taylor Sen, *Feasts and Fasts: A History of Food in India* (India: Speaking Tiger, 2016, p 139-141)
4. Colleen Taylor Sen, p 139-141)
5. Anoothi Vishal, 'Chaat is not a competitive sport, though like any sport, it is dense with nuanced history', Scroll.in, Feb 02, 2021 <https://scroll.in/magazine/984636/is-golgappa-better-than-paani-puri-and-phuchka-that-is-the-wrong-question-to-ask>
6. Anoothi Vishal.
7. Interview conducted by author, May 2021
8. Dan Packel, 'Inside India's Street Food Paradise', AFAR, Oct 20, 2011 <https://www.afar.com/magazine/indias-street-food-paradise--2>