CHAPTER FOUR
India is a land of varied cultures and inevitably food also varies from region to region. It is influenced not only by the physical environment but by custom and religion as well. Food, particularly cooked food, has always been deeply entrenched in the culture, religion and ethos of different communities and societies of India. Cooking and partaking of cooked food are not merely connected with satisfaction of hunger but also fulfillment of cultural conditions and prescriptions. In the Hindu society considerations of caste and commensal ban across caste lines have been of great importance in the consumption of cooked food. Given the predominantly rural character of the Indian population (74% in the 1991 census) and the essentially agricultural nature of its economy, the culture of eating out and patronizing commercial eateries have been limited to towns and cities.

\[1\text{For details, see Khare 1976a and 1976b, Achaya 1994:62-68.}\]
Assam too, is largely rural, where 89 per cent of its total population still live in rural areas. Here, cultural, religious and other social factors play determining roles with regard to cooking and eating of food. The more conservative among the Assamese Hindus still adhere to the traditional taboos and restrictions while eating cooked food.

There are, however, some food which transcend all restrictions associated with the process of eating. These are sweetmeats and food prepared from milk and its products. As with the rest of the country, even in Assam, eating of sweetmeat in places outside home is permissible. Such food can be carried from place to place and when people visit relatives, it is customary to carry food hampers of home cooked sweetmeats and other edibles. However, none of these ready-to-eat Assamese sweetmeats and snacks which can be transported and preserved has graduated to street food.

The selling of ready-to-eat food in the street is a highly visible activity in many cities of the world. In a developing country like India, selling of street food in towns and cities is a ubiquitous activity. This feature is true not only for a developing country like India, but is a growing phenomenon even in the “developed” cities (Tinker 1994). In India, street food vendors in a city like Pune (population 16 lakhs in 1991) in Maharashtra sells as many as 95 varieties of food (Kulkarni 1992). In Guwahati too (population 5.84 lakhs in 1991), vendors sell a variety of street food. A count taken in 1991 showed that as many as 55 varieties of street food were sold in Guwahati. These include an array of different sweet, salted and spicy items some of which are snacks while others range from light to full scale meals. In addition, tea, different types of fruits, fruit juices
and ice sticks also constitute a part of ready-to-eat food\textsuperscript{2}. Fig. 5 gives the frequency of street food vendors according to varieties of food sold.

**TYPES OF STREET FOOD**

There is a wide variety of street food prepared and sold in Guwahati. These may broadly be divided into five different types: relishes, snacks and light meals, sweetmeats, fruits and juices and meals. Each of these is addressed to a specific type of clientele and has its own unique niche in the street food arena. A description of the different types of food are given below.

**Relishes**

These are the spicy, salty, sweet and sour food which are eaten largely to satisfy the palate and can be had at any time of the day. Usually, these are served with a distinctive taste and flavour. These edibles are inherently street food in the sense that these are more appealing only when eaten in the street. These include hot roasted *chana* (chick peas), *jhal muri* (spicy puffed rice), *phuska* (little dough puffs filled with a sour, peppery liquid) and *bhelpuri* (mixture of crushed dough crisps, puffed rice, sweet and sour chutney, chilli and fragrant coriander leaves), etc. The relishes are often always sold by the itinerant vendors who belong to the Bihari

\textsuperscript{2}Industrially manufactured juice, aerated drinks and ice creams have been left outside the purview of this study.
**FIG. 5. FREQUENCY OF STREET FOOD VENDORS ACCORDING TO VARIETIES OF FOOD SOLD**

*Legends:*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No.</th>
<th>Item</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Bhel puri</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Boiled eggs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Chanachur</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Chips</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Chat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Chow mein, pulao, roll, ghugni, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Corn</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Curd</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Dosa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Fruit slices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Groundnut</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Hawa mithai, pankha mithai</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Jhalmuri</td>
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<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>Juice</td>
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<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>Kulfi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td>Laddu</td>
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<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td>Phuska</td>
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<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>Pakora</td>
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<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Sweetmeat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>Tea, bun, biscuit, cake, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Tea, roti-sabji, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Rice, dal, sabji, etc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
community. They move about from place to place during the day in a
definite route and finally in the evening stall themselves in a convenient
spot. In fact, their visibility and accessibility create their own demand.
Some of the popular relishes sold in Guwahati are described below.

**Chanachur** (a crisp, fried and parched relish) : It is a crisp
mixture of fried and parched grams, to which are added peanuts, flat rice,
fried gram flour noodles, roasted maize grains, etc. (Plate 1). These
ingredients are mixed together in a spicy, tangy mixture by adding chopped
onions, green chillies, fresh coriander leaves and a dash of lime. This
mixture is made piquant according to the taste and preference of the
customers. A similar traditional relish in Assam is the *mahkarai* prepared
out of a variety of lentil (*mati*), bengal gram, rice, sesame all of which are
parched.

**Chanachur** is a humbler kind of relish popular almost all over
India. It is difficult to pinpoint its origin to any part of the country.
However, as the main ingredient of the *chanachur* is *chana* (gram), its
origin should be in a gram growing area of the country. From that point of
view and also because nearly a large number of *chana* vendors hail from
Bihar, it can be said that the origin of *chanachur* is in Bihar.

There are two types of *chana* vendors. One which vends from a
box on an elongated, cylindrical cane stand (Plate 2). They are widely
prevalent and are very mobile. They have a fixed route which involves a
few routine stops near schools, colleges, offices, cinema halls, etc. In the
evening, they usually gravitate towards market places or children’s parks. In
addition to making these fixed rounds, a chana vendor takes advantage of any demand that may be created in a parking area particularly of trucks, taxis and rickshaws or near bus stands, city bus stops, petrol filling stations or even in a railway crossing where vehicular traffic and people may halt momentarily.

The second type of chana vendors are less mobile. They push a heavy cart which is glass covered (Plate 3). They also follow a fixed route with one or two regular stops. The selling of this relish either from a box or a cart is a male province. These vendors all belong to the Bihari community and constitute the largest group of street food vendors (Fig. 5).

Vendors usually serve with the hand on squares of paper which are deftly turned into cones. As already mentioned, chanachur is a humbler kind of relish and can be eaten cheaply. One helping of this relish costs Rs. 0.50. It is very popular among people of Bihari, Punjabi and Marwari communities, students particularly girls and among people coming from a low socio-economic background (Plates 4 and 5).

Phuska (tiny wheat puffs filled with a sour, peppery liquid) : These are small dough puffs prepared from wheat flour which are deep fried in oil. Phuska is also known as gol gappa or pani puri. It is eaten with a mixture of mashed potatoes and chick peas along with spicy tamarind water.

There are two kinds of phuska vendors. The first kind carry a dala which is a circular bamboo wicker basket with a wooden or cane stand (Plate 6). The second type, who are more mobile, push a small hand cart (Plate 7). Phuskas are usually vended near markets, parks, cinema halls,
etc., in the afternoons and evenings from about 4 p.m. till about 9 p.m. However, vendors selling from push-carts move about the whole day along definite routes. As a customer approaches the vendor, he is offered a conical paper bowl. One by one, the vendor starts serving the phuskas. The vendor punches the puffed top of the phuska with the thumb and stuffs it with a little bit of the potato mix and fills it with the spicy tamarind water. The whole dough puff along with the stuffings and the liquid is put in the mouth (Plate 8). Usually, three phuskas are served for Rs. 2.00 only. It has been observed that phuska eaters are not satisfied with eating only three. They keep on eating more till the need for it subsides.

Phuska is usually eaten by people belonging to the Marwari, Punjabi and Bihari communities and occasionally by the Assamese and the Bengalis. Since it is a relish eaten rarely out of compulsions of hunger, it is not a common food for the wage labourers.

Bhelpuri (a sweet and sour mixture of dough crisps, puffed rice etc.): It is a sweet and sour snack popularly associated with the city of Bombay, now renamed as Mumbai in Maharashtra, India. This snack has diffused from its home locale and has gained immense popularity all over India. Bhelpuri has become synonymous with the name of the city so much so that bhelpuri sold in places other than Mumbai is referred to as “Bombay bhelpuri”. It is unthinkable for a tourist or a visitor to Mumbai not to have tasted this relish. Even Hindi film songs sing of its tantalizing flavour and taste.
**Bhelpuri** is prepared from crushed dough crisps which are mixed with chopped onions, green chillies, sour and sweet chutney of tamarind and jaggery, puffed rice, boiled potatoes, sprouted green grams (optional) and coriander leaves.

The vendors of this food sell from tin boxes with collapsible lid (Plate 9). Inside the box, there are several compartments to store the ingredients of the *bhelpuri*. They are served on leaf, packets or paper plates and eaten with wooden spoons. The price for one such plate of *bhelpuri* costs Rs. 2.00 to Rs. 4.00. *Bhelpuris* are also sold from smaller push-carts. All sellers of this food in the sample are from Bihar.

**Jhalmuri** (spicy puffed rice): It is a spicy preparation made by mixing *muri* (puffed rice) with a variety of spices like red chilli powder, pepper powder, chopped green chillies, onions, fresh coriander leaves, grated raw papayas, boiled potatoes, etc., to which are added a few drops of lemon juice, tamarind chutney or *jira pani* (sour, spicy liquid).

The term *jhalmuri* is derived from the Bengali words *jhal* meaning spicy and hot and *muri* meaning puffed rice. Any food or relish prepared from *muri* or *cira* as the basic ingredient indicates a home root in eastern part of India, a rice growing area, somewhere in Bengal or Assam. This relish is very popular all over rural Bengal. However, it is important to mention that though this relish is indigenous to rural Bengal, all *jhalmuri* sellers in Guwahati are from Bihar (Fig. 5). *Jhalmuri* is sold in Guwahati from three kinds of devices. The first is a tin box measuring approximately 18 by 18 inches with a glass front. It is carried on one shoulder by the
roving vendors. Second type is also a tin box similar to a bhel puri seller's box. The third type uses a small push-cart.

*Jhal muri* is a relish that can be had cheaply at any time of the day. One serving of such a relish costs only Rs. 1.00. It is served on squares of paper or paper plates to be eaten with either a wooden spoon or with small pieces of paper.

*Mumphali* (ground nuts): *Mumphali* or *badam* is a very popular relish primarily eaten during the winter season. It is sold in different forms - roasted, fried and used as an ingredient of *chanachur*. They are sold by both mobile and stationary vendors from boxes, push-carts and by squatting on the roadside (Plates 10). These vendors are by and large from Bihar (17) except a few (6) who are Bengalis. Generally, this trade is carried out by men. Occasionally, women vendors may also be seen (Plate 11). In this study, out of a total of 14 women vendors, 2 are groundnut sellers.

Along with the sale of groundnuts, many vendors particularly those selling from push-carts also sell popcorn (Plate 12). Groundnuts are sold for Rs. 3.00 per 100 grams and popcorns for Rs. 1.00 per packet.

*Makkai* (roasted corn): Like groundnuts, *makkai* is another popular winter relish. These are seen in street corners, bus stops, near market places, etc., where the vendors squat on the ground roasting corn over a makeshift charcoal fire. These vendors are mostly Bihari women (Plate 13) who, after completing their domestic chores, sell this relish from about 4 p.m. till about 8 p.m. in the evening. Tender corn cobs are roasted over burning embers and are served hot with salt and lime rubbed over it to
give a special flavour. Roasted corns are sold for Rs. 3.00 to Rs. 5.00, depending upon the size of the corn.

Snacks and light meals

This constitutes the second category of street food. These are not inherently street food but situation demands that they become so. Some of these snacks and light meals are typically sold in restaurants and snack bars. It ranges from slight snacks to light meals which are often eaten between the two main meals of the day. However, it is to be noted that the concept of 'snacks' and 'meals' vary in different social context and among different communities. Thus it is important to distinguish between the two.

The people in nearly all parts of India make a clear distinction between a meal and a snack. Even the language reflects this difference. Many Indian languages like Assamese, Gujrati, Kannada, Tamil, etc., to name a few, have separate verbs to differentiate between the two (Katona-Apte 1975:316). Snacking or nibbling, like in the West, is not done in India. But snacks which are prepared from grains, legumes, sugar and salt are often eaten along with tea or coffee between the two main meals of the day. Also, the use of a staple and its method of preparation determines whether a food is a snack or a meal. For instance, rice is the staple food in southern and eastern India. When rice grains are boiled whole and served with at least one side dish, it is considered a meal. Broken rice, powdered rice, flattened rice, puffed rice, fermented rice, etc., are considered as snack or tiffin in southern India (ibid. p. 317) and jalpan in Assam and Bihar. In
northern India, where wheat is the staple food, all wheat preparations that are not unleavened bread are snacks, e.g., semolina, farina, cookies and other items prepared from wheat flour.

Sometimes a snack can be more substantial than a meal. It depends upon several factors such as the quality and quantity of the food offered, the eating habits of the individual and the socio-cultural background of the eater.

Some of the snacks and light meals commonly sold by street food sellers in Guwahati are discussed below.

**Pakora** (fritters): The fritters are fried pulse batter often containing vegetables, fish or meat. It is difficult to pinpoint the home locale of this snack because of its immense popularity and presence all over the country. It is known by various names such as *bara* (*vada*) in South India, *pakauri* (*pakoda*) in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, *bor*, *phulori* and *pakora* (*pokori*) in Assam.

The *pakora* is usually prepared from a batter of *besan* (chick pea flour) and pulse paste to which is added chopped onions, green chillies, coriander leaves, salt, turmeric, etc. Small balls of this mixture are deep fried in hot oil. *Pakoras* are sold by stationary vendors from shops, stalls and push carts. During winter, particularly in the evenings, *pakora* sellers are seen making brisk business. Besides eating in the place of sale, customers pack hot fritters to be eaten at home.
MAP OF GUWAHATI CITY, ASSAM, SHOWING DISTRIBUTION OF STREET FOOD VARIETY, 1991

INDEX
FOOD VARIETY  NO.
BHATHPUKI  1
BOILED EGGS  2
CHANACHUR  3
CHIPS  4
CHAT  5
CHOWMEIN, PULAO, ROLL, GHUGNI ETC.  6
CORN  7
CURD  8
DOSA  9
FRUIT SLICES  10
GROUNDNUTS  11
HAWAMITHAI, PANKHAMITHAI  12
JHALMURI  13
JUICE  14
KULFI  15
LADDU  16
PHUSKA  17
PANIPORE  18
SWEETMEAT  19
TEA, BUN, BISCUIT, CAKE ETC.  20
TEA, ROTI, SABJI ETC.  21
RICE, DAL, SABJI ETC.  22

FOOD VARIETY DISTRIBUTION SHOWN AT SOME OF THE IMPORTANT PLACES

NAME OF THE PLACE  F.V. IN NO  SHOWN IN THE MAP AS

REFERENCE
STATE BOUNDARY
G.M.C. BOUNDARY
NATIONAL HIGHWAY, MAJOR ROADS
OTHER ROADS
RAILWAYS
LOCATION
FOOD VARIETY DISTRIBUTION 1, 6, 12, 21

FANCY BAZAR  1, 3, 10, 11, 13, 15, 16, 17, 20, 21  A
PALTAN BAZAR  1, 3, 5, 7, 10, 12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22  B
BHANGARH  3, 20, 21, 22  C
DISPUR COMPLEX  3, 3, 6, 8, 14, 19, 20, 21, 22  D
PANBAZAR  5, 6, 11, 13, 14, 20, 21, 22  E
ATHGAON  1, 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 19, 20, 21, 22  F
In Guwahati, there are some very old and popular *pakora* vendors from where people even from a distance come to buy. They are located in Uzanbazar, Guwahati club area and near Assam Bengal Carriers (ABC) on the G.S. Road (Fig. 6). However, one of the earliest *pakora* sellers was an Assamese *pan* (betel nut and betel leaves) shop keeper located in Panbazar area of the city. This shop no longer exists, but earlier it was the only outlet of cooked food on the roadside in Guwahati.

Ranjit Kumar Sharma (63), a city based businessman, recalls his college days when he was a student of Cotton College from late 1940s to early 1950s. During those days there were very few restaurants in Guwahati. Three of the most popular were - Delight, Oasis and Ananda Jalpan. Besides these eating houses which sold chops, cutlets, omlettes, *bundiya-bhujia* (a sweet-salty mixture) and *singaras* (deep fried wheat patties with savoury stuffings), there was one other place which sold *pakoras*. It was a small shack on the roadside in Panbazar. It was run by a *pan* shop owner, who in the evening prepared fish, prawn and vegetable fritters. This place became so popular that a large crowd of customers used to gather every evening. They were served hot *pakoras* on pieces of paper. Many of them also packed and carry them home.

*Nimki* (salted, triangular dough crisps) : It is a deep fried, salty, crisp triangular shaped snack prepared from wheat flour. The *nimki* cannot be localized to any particular area of India but found all over northern, western and eastern India. It is prepared from a dough made of wheat flour, vegetable oil, salt and water. Small balls of this dough are rolled and cut into halves. Each half is folded to form triangles which are deep fried in oil till light brown.
Nimkis are sold by stationary food vendors and often eaten along with tea. They are priced at Rs. 0.50 per piece. Along with the sale of nimki, many vendors sell khurma. It is a rectangular sweet snack of wheat flour and eaten along with tea. It is also priced at Rs. 0.50 per piece.

Laddu (sweet balls): Laddus are sweet balls prepared from a variety of ingredients like besan, cira, muri, coconut, etc. They do not have a fixed home locale but are popular all over India. In Guwahati, laddus prepared from cira, muri and coconut are popular.

Cira and muri laddu are prepared by heating gur to a honey like consistency and after it cools, parched cira and muri are added to it and balls are prepared. Coconut laddu and its preparation have already been described earlier3.

The sellers of this snack are highly mobile. They belong to the Bihari community except for a few Bengali sellers who sell coconut laddu. There are no Assamese vendors selling laddu, though coconut laddu is an indigenous snack of the Assamese people.

The laddu vendors carry these items in tin boxes. They also carry a bell or a dambaru (small hand drum) to attract customers. Laddus are cheap and easily affordable. They are priced at Rs. 0.50 to Rs. 1.00 per ladddu. These sellers are frequently seen in the localities with mixed population comprising of Punjabis, Bihari, Bengali, Marwari, etc. This snack item can be consumed at any time of the day.

3Please refer to Chapter Two, p. 31.
**Malpua** (a sweet snack of wheat and sugar syrup): Traditionally, the *malpua* belongs to Jiaganj in Murshidabad district of West Bengal. The basic ingredients of this sweet are *chhana* (Indian cottage cheese), *suji* (semolina) and *maida* (refined flour). It is prepared by mixing the above ingredients with a little water and forming small balls and given an elongated shape. It is fried in oil and boiled in hard sugar syrup to give it a brownish colour.

In Guwahati, *malpua* is prepared in a simple manner by mixing *maida* and water with a pinch of bicarbonate of soda. This mixture is beaten to a flowing consistency. Then a ladleful of the mixture is poured in a griddle of hot oil and fried. After removing from fire it is directly put into the sugar syrup and later removed.

**Ghugni** (chick pea curry): It is a food popular in Bihar, parts of northern India, Rajasthan and Gujarat. It is eaten alone or along with *bhatura* (fried, leavened bread) or *roti* (unleavened bread). *Ghugni* or *choley* is a curry prepared by soaking and boiling *kabuli chana* (chick peas). When it becomes soft after boiling it is seasoned and fried in oil with the addition of spices like turmeric, cumin seeds, black pepper, salt, etc.

*Ghugni* is sold by the stationary vendors and are priced at Rs. 2.00 per plate. The *bhaturas* cost Rs. 1.00 each.

**Chat** (spicy, tangy, mashed potatoes): This snack is a preparation of boiled, mashed potatoes. It is generally eaten with a fresh salad of tomato, onion, radish, carrot, etc., and garnished with boiled chick peas, tomato sauce or a tamarind and date chutney along with fresh coriander
leaves and chillies (Plate 14). *Chat* is sold by vendors primarily belonging to the Bihari community. It is priced at Rs. 2.00 per plate.

**Chop**: It is a salted food item which is either round or egg-shaped made from boiled potatoes. To most western readers chop would usually mean a thick slice of meat, especially pork or lamb including the rib. The chop of the West has been highly nativised in India and closely associated with the ‘tea-cabin’ culture in the urban milieu.

Chop is prepared by mashing boiled potatoes, to which is added salt, turmeric, coriander leaves and stuffed with fried vegetables or minced meat. It is deep fried in oil. Chops are also made by sandwiching two slices of bread with a layer of mashed potatoes. It is called bread chop or bread *pakora*. Sometimes chops are also prepared from boiled eggs. Chops are sold by vendors from shops, shacks or push-carts (which are stationary) along with other items like tea, *pakora*, *ghugni*, etc. The chop, bread chop and egg chops are priced at Rs. 1.50, Rs. 1.00 and Rs. 2.00 respectively.

This snack is a favourite food for those who frequent restaurants and fast food stalls like college students, office-goers, etc. However, this same snack is available at a cheaper rate in the roadside stalls and commonly eaten by them. Rickshaw pullers and other informal sector workers do not usually eat chops, but bread chop which is cheaper and also filling is frequently eaten by them.

**Roll**: Unlike the concept of roll in the West which is a loaf of bread cut open and stuffed with a specific food - a sausage etc., the roll as
sold by street food vendors in Guwahati is entirely different. It is prepared by rolling a roti (unleavened bread) with shredded and fried vegetables or meat usually mutton or chicken. It is sealed in the lower end with a sheet of paper so that the stuffings do not come out while eating.

Roll is prepared by stationary vendors belonging to Assamese and Bengali communities. This snack is sold by very few vendors (r) along with chowmein, pulao, chop, etc. The price of roll ranges from Rs. 4.00 to Rs. 8.00.

Chowmein (boiled and fried noodles): It is basically a Chinese dish prepared by boiling noodles and adding boiled and fried vegetables to it. Sometimes eggs and shredded meat are added. Chowmein is a full meal in itself and can be eaten as a snack also. College students, office goers and casual shoppers generally eat chowmein (Plate 15). Hence, the sellers of this food are mostly seen near colleges and commercial areas.

Until a few years ago, chowmein was confined to restaurants. However, the fact that it can be cooked in less time and that a substantial quantity can be eaten cheaply has increased its popularity, thereby making its entry into street food arena very easy. The price of one full plate of vegetable chowmein is Rs. 8.00. This plate is about the size of a dinner plate and is served with a heapful of noodles which can be easily shared by two individuals. A similar plate of chicken noodles costs Rs. 12.00 to Rs. 15.00 only. The vendors of chowmein are generally Assamese and Bengali people who sell such food along with pulao, roll, chops, etc. from covered
stationary push-carts. There are 5 such sellers (Fig. 5). One of them used to sell from a motorized vehicle but is presently a restaurant owner.

*Pulao* (a rice dish): It is a rice preparation of Central Asian origin and considered a delicacy. It is a course in its own right when cooked with vegetables or meat. The *pulao* was introduced into India by the Moghuls and became the main preparation in the Muslim cuisine in India (Chowdhury 1990).

*Pulao* is prepared from a fine, fragrant and long grained variety of rice. There are different methods of preparing *pulao*. In Guwahati, it is commonly prepared by cooking the rice grains partially and frying it with the addition of spices like onions, ginger, garlic, cumin seeds, salt, turmeric powder, bay leaves, etc. *Pulao* is usually eaten along with a vegetable or a meat curry either as a meal or as a substitute for meals. *Pulao* is sold by stationary sellers who sell chowmein, roll, chop, ghugni, roti-sahji, etc., (Plate 16) and is priced between Rs. 5.00 to 10.00 per plate. The sellers of this food are not many in Guwahati (Fig. 5).

*Dosa* (rice and lentil pancakes): It is typically a dish of the southern part of India, particularly the states of Karnataka and Tamilnadu.

To prepare *dosa*, rice and a variety of lentil (*urad*) are ground in a definite proportion and mixed with little water to form a batter. A ladleful of this batter is poured over a flat pan or griddle to form a paper thin pancake. A stuffing of spiced potato mash, seasoned with salt, mustard seeds and spilt gram lentils are put in the pancake and folded lightly. The *dosa* is served hot along with *sambar* (a spicy lentil soup preparation) and a
chutney. It can also be eaten without the stuffing, in which case it is called the paper *dosa* or plain *dosa* and can be eaten as a snack or as a substitute for a meal.

The *dosa* is no longer concentrated in its traditional home locale. It has diffused to distant areas and even acquired local flavours. It is a very popular food served in almost all good hotels and restaurants all over the country. Nowadays, in Guwahati, the *dosa* is also vended by mobile vendors. It is interesting to mention that the only *dosa* vendor in Guwahati, is not from south India but from Bihar.

Ratan Jha (22) is a Bihari *dosa* seller originally hailing from Champaran district of Bihar. He migrated to Guwahati following his elder brother who came prior to him. Ratan worked along with his brother in a small restaurant in Guwahati for about seven months. There he learnt how to prepare different types of food including the *dosa*.

During his stay in the restaurant, he had seen the immense popularity of *dosa* among people of different communities. It struck upon him that if he could sell quality *dosa* and provide it hot in the doorstep of the customers, he could make good business. So, he along with his brother (who still works in the restaurant) prepares the *dosa* mix at home. With the help of a licensed push-cart he sells *dosa* from street to street in residential and business areas of the city.

Every day of the week from about 3 p.m. onwards till about 7 p.m., he prepares and sells *dosa* instantly from a hearth that he carries on the cart. On an average, he sells about 60 *dosas* per day at the rate of Rs. 4.00 per *dosa* (restaurant price ranges from Rs. 8.00 to Rs. 15.00 per *dosa*).
**Bhapa pitha** (steamed rice cake): This snack is prepared from rice powder which is mixed with jaggery and water. It is given a circular shape and steamed. The *bhapa pitha* is similar to the Assamese *tekeli mukhat diya pitha*. It is prepared by the Bihari vendors and eaten by the immigrant Muslim and Bihari rickshaw pullers, *thela* pullers and daily wage labourers. This cake is priced at Rs. 0.50 for a small sized one and Rs. 1.00 for a big one. It can also be eaten along with milk, in which case the price is Rs. 1.50. Since this food is very cheap and gives the feeling of fullness, it is a common snack among the daily workers.

**Anda** (egg): Since the advent of modern methods of egg farming in India, ‘vegetarian’ or unfertilized eggs are slowly being accepted and eaten by Indian vegetarians. The egg, besides being a rich source of protein is also cheaply available. In the recent past, there has been a sudden proliferation in the egg supply to the city of Guwahati. This is primarily due to an increase in production at hatcheries in Andhra Pradesh from where large quantities of eggs are brought to Assam. Due to its increased supply, it began to be easily accessible at bus stops, market places and street corners in a boiled form. Street food vendors sit in convenient corners and offer boiled eggs along with salt. The egg, being a cheap source of protein is eaten by a large number of people belonging to the low socio-economic section and office workers, etc. However, it is not popular among Bihari rickshaw and *thela* pullers. Sale of boiled eggs is more in the evenings and during the winter season.
Sweetmeats

The third category of street food is comprised of sweetmeats. Sweets have always enjoyed a place of pre-eminence in the Hindu food categorization. In spite of sweetmeats being subjected to cooking (fried, baked, boiled, etc.) they are free from ritual pollution (Cantlie 1984:193). Due to this feature, sweetmeats have always been transported, sold in sweetmeat shops and weekly markets and also have gained easy entry into street food. However, all sweetmeats have not become street sweets. Only those sweetmeats which are portable as well as popular and also retain for sometime have found their way to the streets. In Guwahati, there are a number of street food vendors selling sweetmeats (Fig. 5). They are mainly two types. The first type are the stationary vendors who sell sweetmeats along with tea, bun, etc., from pushcarts, shops and stalls. The second type are the mobile vendors like the seasonal migrant Bengali sellers who come from Barddhaman district of West Bengal. These people who possess considerable skill in making sweetmeat come to Guwahati every year in search of a lucrative market and sell sweetmeats typical of their region. They sell *mihidana* and *sitabhog*. They prefer to sell in the streets in both residential and business areas, not because people look to the street to eat sweetmeat but to avoid any permanent establishment cost that a shop would incur.

There is also another group of roving sweetmeat sellers who do not prepare the sweets themselves but buy these from small manufacturers
and sell them from door-to-door in different localities of the city. They are usually Bihari men who sell sandesh and sohnpapri.

Some of the popular sweetmeats sold in the streets of Guwahati are described below.

**Rasogolla (sweetmeat ball in syrup)**: It is a very popular sweetmeat having its origin in West Bengal. *Rasogolla* is made from ingredients like chhana, suji, sugar and water. It is prepared by mixing chhana and suji thoroughly. The dough is divided into small portions rolled into balls. They are then cooked for about five minutes in boiling sugar syrup, after which they are transferred to a stock syrup which is thicker in consistency than the boiling syrup.

*Rasogolla* is one of the earliest sweetmeats to have been sold in Guwahati.

Kamala Devi (81) is a resident of Bharalumukh, in Guwahati. She recalls that just after World War II and around the time of India’s independence in 1947, itinerant sweetmeat sellers (mostly Bengali) used to sell rasogolla and curd from house to house. They used to balance two saucepans on either side carrying the sweetmeat and above this on a wooden board a clay bowl of curd. These Bengali vendors used to come twice a week. Her husband, who was very fond of sweets used to buy rasogollas regularly.

Today however, such sweet vendors are rare except in the Bengali populated areas of the city like Pandu, Maligaon, Rehabari, Noonmati Railway colony, etc. (Fig. 6).
**Sandesh** (sweetmeat of baked chhana and sugar): It is a famous sweetmeat of West Bengal. The Bengali word *sandesh* originally meant “news”⁴. But with its long use it has primarily come to mean the sweetmeat itself. The basic ingredients used in the preparation of this sweet are *chhana* and a fine variety of sugar.

*Sandesh* is prepared by two methods. The first is by the addition of powdered sugar to the *chhana* which are mixed and cooked over a slow fire. After it cools, it is cast in different moulds to give a variety of shapes. The second method involves the use of syrup instead of powdered sugar. The rest of the process is similar to the first method. *Sandesh* is also prepared from jaggery, which is substituted for sugar. It is sold in Guwahati by Bengali and Bihari vendors.

**Sohnpapri** (light, fluffy sweetmeat): *Sohnpapri* is a sweetmeat famous in parts of Bihar and Rajasthan. It is prepared from refined wheat flour, gram flour, clarified butter and sugar. All these ingredients are mixed in a definite proportion and fried over a medium fire for about two hours. After the mixture becomes liquid, it is removed from fire and ghee is added to it and allowed to cool. This is known as *khurara*. Then a syrup of sugar is prepared by heating sugar and a little proportion of unrefined sugar. When it becomes hard, it is removed from fire and the *khurara* is added to this syrup till it absorbs all of it. It is then slightly kneaded and spread over a wooden plank to be cut into squares.

⁴Whenever one has to enquire about the news of any relatives or friends, it was customary to send sweets along with the messenger.
In Guwahati, the sellers of *sohnpapri* are primarily from Bihar and West Bengal. It is vended from tin boxes like those of the *jhalmuri* sellers and from saucepans.

*Mihidana* (fine sweet fritters): It is a famous sweetmeat having its home locale in the Barddhaman district of West Bengal. These are fine, yellow coloured globules of pulse flour, fried in ghee, treated with sugar syrup and stored dry. The basic ingredients necessary are *matar meal* (peas pulse), *kalai* pulse (a variety of pulse), sugar, rice powder and ghee. A batter of the pulses are made after grinding it to a fine paste. A skimmer (with fine holes) is held over a hot pan of ghee. A cupful of the batter is put on the skimmer and tiny fritters rain down to the hot ghee. After straining they are put in the sugar syrup. When all of the fritters soak up the syrup they are transferred to a platter.

*Mihidana* is primarily sold by the seasonal migrant vendors from Barddhaman district of West Bengal. They carry with them sufficient quantities of dry *mihidana* and after coming to Guwahati, they soak these dry fritters in sugar syrup as and when necessary. These migrant vendors occasionally sell *sitabhog* (a sweetmeat resembling rice grains) along with *mihidana*.

*Jilebi* (coiled, tubular, fried pastry, soaked in sugar syrup): It is a flat spiral of fermented batter, fried in hot oil and soaked hot in sugar syrup of medium consistency and removed. The *jilebi* finds mention in several ancient works\(^5\).

\(^5\)For details, see Achaya 1994:155.
It is prepared from a fermented mixture of refined flour, sugar, oil and rice flour. This mixture is fried over a pan of hot oil from a special device, usually a tumbler with a hole at the bottom. The batter filled tumbler is held over the pan and in a circular motion the hole is released. Crisp *jilebis* are strained and immediately put in the syrup.

*Jilebis* are sold in Guwahati by stationary vendors who sell *pakoras*. During festive occasions, this sweet is sold along with *bundiya* (sweet fritters), *khurma*, etc. (Plate 17).

Beside the sweetmeats already described, there are a number of sweet items which are largely meant for children. They include *hawa mithai*, *pankha mithai*, chips, etc. (Plates 18 and 19).

**Hawa mithai** (air-filled sweet): It is a popular children’s sweet resembling a ball of cotton wool. It is pink or yellow in colour and derives its name from the Hindi words *hawa*, meaning air, and *mithai* - a sweetmeat. It is so called because as one bites into this small ball of sweetmeat, air trapped inside comes out.

*Hawa mithai* is prepared in the same manner as *sohnpapri* except that it is made more fine and into small balls of spun sugar. This sweet is sold in polythene packets. Each packet contains six *hawa mithais* and priced at Rs. 1.00 only. The sellers, totaling nine, are all males from Bihar and are mobile. These vendors carry the packets by stringing them in a wire ring. *Hawa mithai* is also sold along with *pankha mithai* and *sohnpapri* in tin boxes.
**Pankha mithai** (fan-shaped sweet): It is prepared from sugar solids and gets its name from its shape. It resembles a *pankha* (a Hindi word meaning hand-fan). This sweet is white in colour and striped with red and green colours. They are sold by the mobile vendors who are from Bihar. Like the *hawa mithai*, *pankha mithai* is also a children’s sweet and is priced at Rs. 0.25 each.

**Kulfi** (a frozen dessert): It is a frozen confection developed in India long before ice cream was manufactured commercially\(^6\). Brought by the Moghuls from Kabul or prepared by them in India, the *kulfi* derives its name from the conical metal device in which it was made. In the Ain-i-Akbari (1590 A.D.), the mode of preparation of *kulfi* finds place in the description of Emperor Akbar’s royal kitchen. To prepare this dessert, a sweetened mixture of *khoa* (thickened milk, almost solid), dry fruits like pistachio, currants, and saffron strands are frozen in conical metal containers after sealing the contents with dough. These containers are put inside a *handi* (big clay pot) along with ice and salt and churned or rocked with both hands till the *kulfi* freezes.

The technique of making this ice cream is a very old one. *Kulfi* is also one of the oldest street food sold in Assam as well as in Guwahati. Today, the *kulfi* sellers (Bihari) are few in number and their market has increasingly been captured by machine made and industrially prepared ice creams and ice sticks. *Kulfi* is sold from carts for Rs. 1.00 each and the sellers are highly mobile (Plate 20).

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Fruits and fruit juices

Selling of fruits on the roadside or on the pavements is a common activity in Guwahati. Fruit vendors sell variety of fruits like apple, banana, pineapple, mosambi, orange, pomegranate, grape, etc. But these do not constitute a part of street food. Such fruits are not prepared or sold in a ready-to-eat form. However, certain fruits like anaras (pineapple), tarbuj (watermelon), narial (coconut), papita (papaya), and khira (cucumber) are sold by street food vendors in a ready-to-eat and prepared manner. These fruits are cut into sections and displayed on tray, dish or boxes and sold by mobile vendors (Plate 21). All vendors selling fruits belong to the Bihari community and predominantly males. There are many street food vendors who take to the selling of seasonal fruits at one time of the year alternately with the sale of chanachur or jhalmuri, etc.

Besides the eating of seasonal fruits in the streets, drinking of juice, particularly in summer, is popular. Ganne ka ras (sugar cane juice), dab (tender coconut water) and coloured drinks are commonly available (Plates 22, 23 and 24). Sugar cane juice is sold by vendors from Bihar who are mobile. Tender coconut is sold exclusively by the Assamese vendors who are stationary.

Meals

The last category of street food is basically home food but because of urban compulsions and demand have come to the street. These are
the meals which comprise of roti (unleavened bread) or bhat (boiled rice) as the staple food. These are eaten along with dal (lentils) and different types of curries, both vegetarian and non-vegetarian.

**Roti-sabji** : Meal prepared with roti as the principal food is the staple diet of most people from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh and parts of North India, etc. Dry roasted forms of roti include the common chapati, roasted on a hot griddle and sometimes puffed out to a phulka by brief contact with live coals. Sometimes, wheat dough after rolling out can be either pan fried using just a little fat or deep fried. The first kind is common and often round or triangular in shape. It is the paratha. The roti and the paratha are always eaten with a sabji (curry) commonly prepared from seasonal vegetables or dal (Plate 25).

A roti-sabji meal is sold by stationary sellers and consumed both as a snack as well as a meal. It is eaten by daily wage earners and other informal sector workers. In addition, office goers and travellers also form a significant group. This food besides being a filler is also cheap. It is priced at Rs. 0.50 per roti and Rs. 1.00 for a plate of curry.

**Bhat** (boiled rice) : The eating of rice is a part and parcel of the life of the people in eastern and southern India. In India, there are many ways of cooking rice. It may be boiled, steamed, fried or flavoured with different ingredients. However, the proper way to cook rice is a controversial subject because there are so many different methods of doing so. In Assam, boiled rice is not only the staple food but is regarded as the

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only food upon which life is dependent. In the traditional Hindu context, the eating of boiled rice was carried out according to elaborate rules of ritual purity (Cantlie 1984: 194). Boiled rice and all other dishes such as *dal*, *bhaji*, fish or meat curry were cooked in the kitchen. If they were cooked outside, the hearth, burnt ashes and all wastes of fire were thrown away. The rigidity associated with the preparation and eating of rice and its accompanying dishes was so high (in the Hindu context) it was unthinkable that boiled rice could emerge as a component of street food.

In Guwahati, stationary street food vendors provide both vegetarian and non-vegetarian meals. A vegetarian meal consists of boiled rice, *dal*, vegetable curry and fried vegetable preparation. A non-vegetarian meal consists of the above mentioned items and a curry which is of either fish or meat - usually goat’s meat. However, pork and beef are also cooked in those areas where the demand for such meat exists⁸. For instance, pork is eaten by certain scheduled caste communities while beef is eaten by the Muslims (Plate 26).

The vendors who provide rice and curry meals are always of stationary nature and have some kind of sitting arrangements. They belong to Bihari, Bengali and Assamese communities and operate from shops, stalls or carts. These vendors are found in large numbers near the Guwahati railway station, Dispur Capital Complex, Guwahati Medical College Hospital, Adabari Bus Stand, near the Fancy Bazar wholesale market,

⁸See also Chapter Five, p. 91.
rickshaw and thela stands and along the National Highway No. 37 by-pass (Fig. 6). These vendors not only cater to the afternoon meals of a large number of transient and floating population in the city but also provide meals at night for those who have no cooking arrangement at their place of stay. It has been observed that stationary vendors who during the daytime sell tea, bun, biscuit, chat, pakora, etc., switch over to meals at night for a host of permanent customers like daily wage earners, shopkeepers, thela, rickshaw pullers, pony cart operators, numerous other informal sector workers, bus and truck drivers, travellers and even office workers who have no families along with them. Though there are only 32 sellers of rice meals and 24 roti-sabji sellers, at night they and 18 sellers of tea, bun, biscuit, etc., take to the selling of meals making it the single largest category of street food to be sold in Guwahati. Thus the popular misconception that street food are snacks and not real meals holds no ground.

A look at the varieties of street food discussed in this chapter shows that these are not indigenous food of the Assamese, but largely introduced and popularized by the migrants who came from other parts of the country. Assamese food inspite of having the attributes of street food such as portability, durability, etc., never appeared as street food. One can perhaps rationalize this from a historical point of view. Assamese people lacked a tradition of eating out. They were basically cultivators. Participation in trade and commerce was negligible. It was only gradually, after several groups of immigrant people began to settle in Assam and pressure on land began to mount, that Assamese people took to occupations other than cultivation. When some of them started street food vending the market
was already taken up by popular non-Assamese varieties of street food leaving no place for Assamese food.