By **Ratna Bhushan**

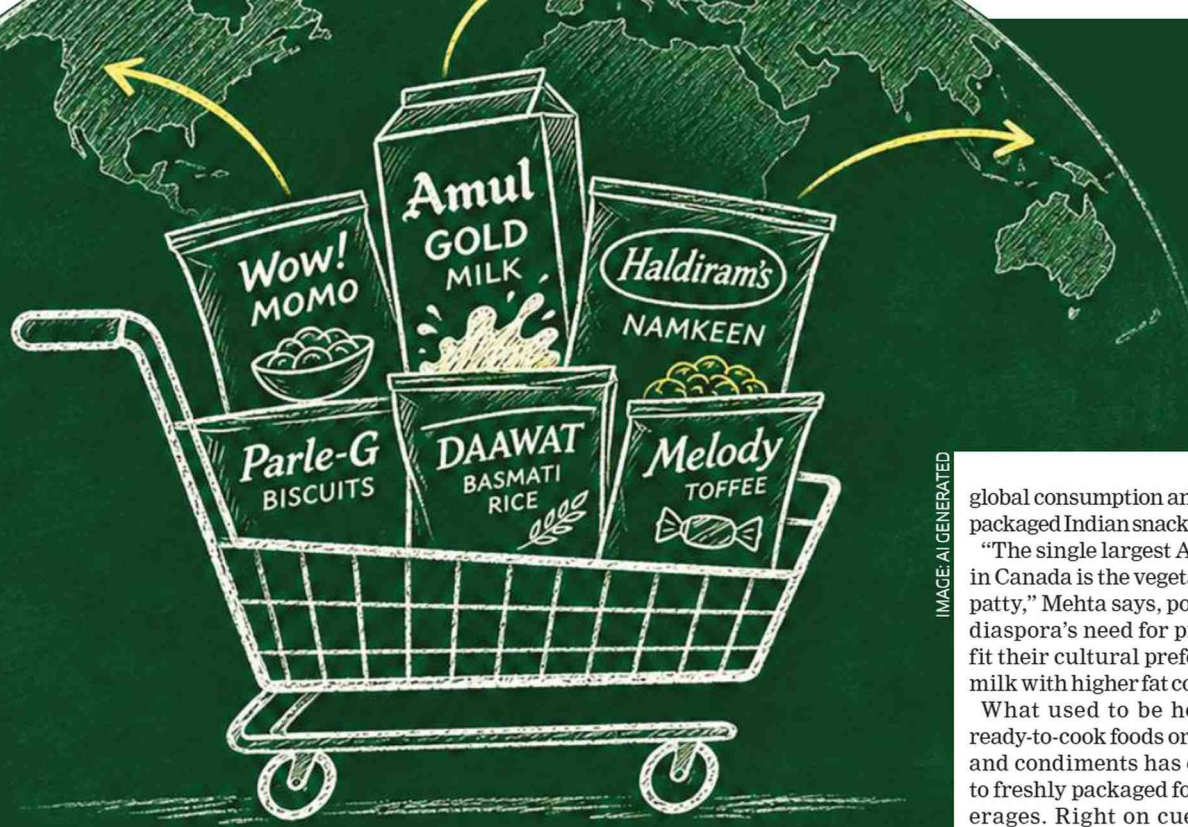

IMAGE: AI GENERATED

The Great Indian Food Adventure

Desi flavours are breaking out on international grocery aisles, as Indian brands make their way into global markets

Little did Amul India's managing director Jayen Mehta expect that resistance to his ambitious plans to introduce fresh milk in the United States two years back would come from his own sister. "When I took the first sample of Amul Gold with 6% fat to my sister who lives in New Jersey, she looked at it with disbelief and asked me in Gujarati if I'd gone crazy," he quips. But since then, things have gone rather well for Amul. In a market that was used to milk with 2–3% fat, Amul Gold in the US is doubling in sales year on year. He managed to convince his sister, too, who has since shared photos of "very thick yogurt from Gold".

In true cooperative fashion, for the US, Mehta roped in a cooperative as partner – the century-old Michigan Milk Producers Association (MMPA). It is a model he is keen on.

"You have to find a way to scale the cooperative model globally, as we have with MMPA in the US and COVAP in Spain, where we have tied up with cooperatives for manufacturing Amul milk to cater to North America and Europe," Mehta says.

Amul isn't the only Indian food brand seeking a bigger push globally. From Wow! Noodles in New Zealand, Haldiram's namkeens in the UK, Parle Melody toffees in Italy and LT Foods' sauces in the States, packaged Indian food brands are finding space on global retail shelves and dining tables more than ever.

With local manufacturing, supermarket tie-ups, acquisitions, and restaurant franchises locked in, brands want to take authentic Indian tastes to the global mainstream. Why now?

Evolution Time

Indian food brands have had an overseas presence for years. What's been happening in recent times is distinct escalation, with changing diets like veganism spearheading global consumption and affinity for packaged Indian snacks.

"The single largest Amul product in Canada is the vegetarian burger patty," Mehta says, pointing to the diaspora's need for products that fit their cultural preferences, like milk with higher fat content.

What used to be heat-and-eat, ready-to-cook foods or dried pastes and condiments has evolved now to freshly packaged foods and beverages. Right on cue, Amul has expanded to 38 out of 50 American states, along with Spain, Portugal, Germany, the Netherlands, and France in Europe. Amul is also available in Japan with French fries now and soon, cheese.

Interestingly, Amul almost never needs to localise tastes for overseas markets, except if there are any regulatory compliances to be met. "Indians abroad want the same dal makhani as they have in a restaurant in Delhi," says Mehta.

As for the rate of growth, all Mehta will say is the overseas sales numbers are escalating very rapidly on a smaller base than India.

Brands Aboard

That shift has many companies excited. One year ago, the packaged FMCG business of Wow! Momo Foods began selling momos, noodles, smileys, and kulfis in 14 countries, including Saudi Arabia, Russia, Singapore, New Zealand, the UK, and Germany. Beginning January next year, they will be starting their restaurant business in Sri Lanka, with three outlets in Colombo.

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MD, Amul India



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CMO, Parle Products

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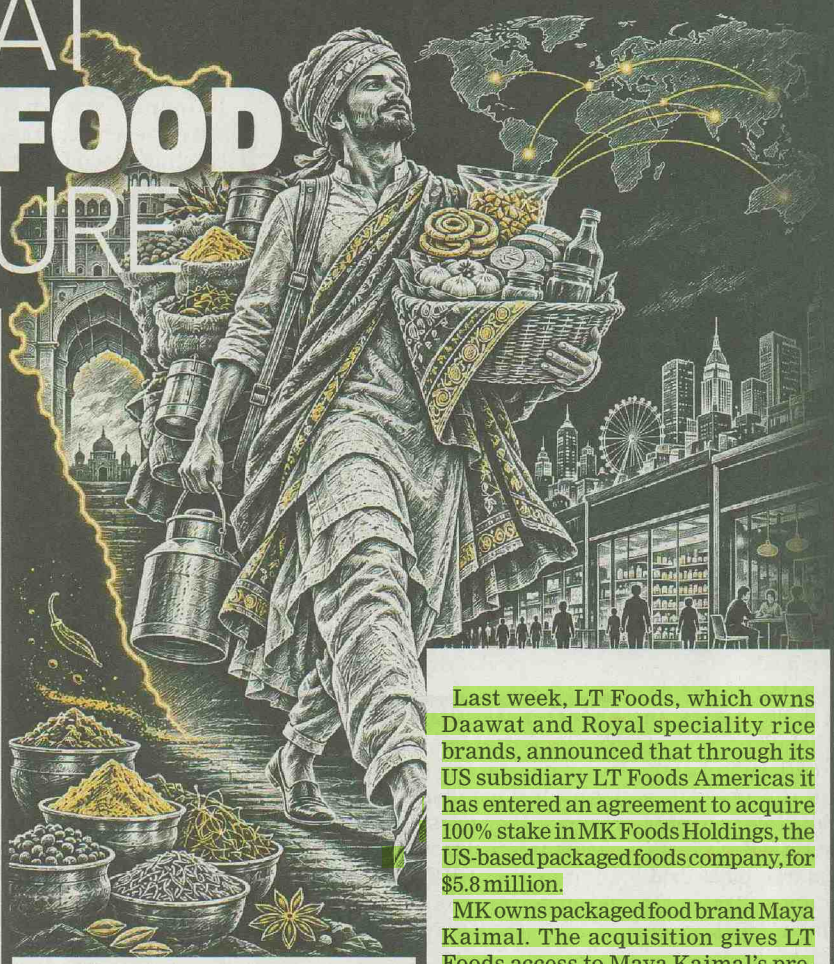
THE GREAT INDIAN FOOD ADVENTURE



The expansion blueprint includes 20 outlets planned over the first two years in Sri Lanka, to be followed by Dubai, Abu Dhabi, and Sharjah in the UAE as their next forays.

"We are in discussions with prospective partners and exploring joint venture and master franchisee structures," says **Sagar Daryani**, co-founder, Wow! Momo Foods. "It's a clear journey of local going global and Sri Lanka and UAE are like warm-ups to more ventures," he adds. The next stop could be the United States.

For its packaged business, Wow! Momo has signed strategic partnerships with LuLu Group, Amazon, and Carrefour for expansion across the Middle East on e-commerce and modern trade. In Singapore, Wow! Momo has partnered with Mustafa Centre. More retail tie-ups in other countries are in the works, says Daryani.

Parle, a company that has been exporting its biscuits to over 150 countries, with manufacturing bases in 10 countries including Mexico and Bahrain, says the acceleration in recent years has been significant.

"There has been a surge of Indian brands in overseas markets over the past couple of years. Growing Indian diaspora, students, and tourism are all reasons, but the recent push has been local populations taking to Indian foods. It's the Indianness of taste and formats that's working with the local populations in different countries," says Mayank Shah, CMO, Parle Products.

Parle started to trend globally rather unexpectedly. In May this year, the Melody caramel-chocolate toffee broke the internet after Prime Minister Narendra Modi gifted it to Italian Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni. Parle didn't lose any time riding the wave and responded with its own ads across social platforms. It followed up with a coffee-tiramisu variant to continue the global momentum Melody candy was seeing.

For Parle, 10% of its total turnover comes from overseas markets, which includes exports plus local manufacturing.

Investment Spike

Last year, a spree of global marquee investors including Singapore's Temasek, UAE's International Holding Company, Alpha Wave Global, and L Catterton invested in Haldiram Snacks Food at a combined valuation of over $10 billion, with clear messaging in their statements – they were betting on Haldiram's "global expansion plans in key large Indian diaspora countries such as the US and the Middle East".



Last week, LT Foods, which owns Daawat and Royal speciality rice brands, announced that through its US subsidiary LT Foods Americas it has entered an agreement to acquire 100% stake in MK Foods Holdings, the US-based packaged foods company, for $5.8 million.

MK owns packaged food brand Maya Kaimal. The acquisition gives LT Foods access to Maya Kaimal's premium Indian-inspired shelf-stable sauces, ready-to-eat curries, and rice products and expands its presence in the US packaged foods market beyond its existing rice business.

Terming the US a "strategically important growth market", **Ashwani Arora**, managing director, LT Foods, says about the Maya Kaimal buyout: "The acquisition is a strategic step in further strengthening our consumer foods platform in the US... these are highly complementary to our existing business and give us a compelling opportunity to expand our portfolio into high-growth, value-added categories."

Bigger brands like Amul are also spending on marketing globally, with the idea of cross leveraging the overseas presence. Amul sponsored the US, South African (finalist) and Sri Lankan cricket teams in the 2024 T20 World Cup and globally sponsored both FIFA world cup finalist teams – Spain and Argentina – this year.

These Indian food brands want a big bite of the pie thousands of miles from home.

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