

# The Socio-Economics of Your Plate

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*Where does your local vegetable vendor get his/her produce from? Who grows the heirloom tomatoes in the salad at your favourite restaurant? Simrit Malhi takes a hard look at some of the key issues facing the agricultural supply chain. Having lived in Bombay most of my life, many of the big life moments were celebrated with meals at my favourite restaurants. I sometimes knew who the chef was; but never from where, or more importantly,*

whom

, my food was coming from. And while we revel in our pop-ups and artisanal bakeries, these unnamed, anonymous farmers that feed us, continue to commit suicide just outside the city boundaries. According to the findings published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences, or PNAS (University of California), India will see even more suicides as climate change continues to damage crops and exacerbates drought. Not surprisingly, most of these victims are small-farm holders with less than 5 acres of land. To grow food sustainably, with no chemicals, and to enrich the topsoil, it is necessary to grow a varied biodiversity of food — on a small, manageable piece of land. In case one crop fails, it helps to have another as back up. However, India's current food supply chains favour large mono-crop plantations, so that produce can be sold in bulk in the wholesale markets or mandis. Less than 10 kilograms, and no one's willing to pay for the transport needed to reach the markets. According to

a paper by Ishita Verma

, these mandis aren't uniformly accessible across the country (the average Indian farmer needs to travel 12 kilometres to reach the nearest mandi, whereas a farmer in the North East travels more than 50 kilometres). This is despite recommendations by the National Farmers Commission to have wholesale markets available within a 5 kilometre radius. This means that storage is an important part of the supply chain. The Planning Commission recently estimated the gap between agri-warehousing supply and demand at 35 million metric tonnes, with North India having access to 60% of the total storage infrastructure. India's current cold storage capacity at 25 metric tonnes is barely sufficient for 10% of fruits and vegetables produced in the country. Because of the distance to mandis, lack of storage facilities and an unawareness of the market price of their produce, farmers often fall prey to 'contractors'. Contractors seem important to farmers because they do the tough job of harvesting the produce (mostly fruit) and pay the farmer in bulk in the beginning of the year, regardless of how the season goes — giving the farmers a kind of insurance on their farm. However, this 'contract' is detrimental to farmers because of the low rates they actually receive for their produce, with the contractors making all of the profit on the produce. Gayatri, who runs Vrindavan Farms outside Bombay and supplies produce to many of its restaurants believes that there is an urgent need for honest fair-trade supply in our chains. She says, "The current system is fraught with unnatural inputs that manipulate the produce with middle-men making the bulk of the income." Even worse, nowadays the contractors in question are brands, retailers and FMCG businesses, which rely heavily on a steady supply of ingredients from small-farm holders. In India, PepsiCo's much hailed supply chain for tomatoes and potatoes in Punjab failed miserably. As contractors, Pepsi gave contracts to several farmers for their produce. This resulted in an increase in the production of tomatoes, which was hailed as a success...till the prices of tomatoes dropped because of the large yield and Pepsi started paying them as low a price



as ₹1.50 per kilogram.

So, how can we as consumers help? We

need more people to bridge this constantly growing gap between Urban and Rural India, and we need to get there before PepsiCo and Nestle take over our best produce to be processed and sold in plastic packets. I spoke to Rahul Pabreja, from The Farmers Store in Bandra, who is doing his share to bridge this wide gap. "I make a point of buying produce only from rural or indigenous farmers. In fact, I believe that there are too many poor farmers to support for the store to get its own farm." He sources out the farmers through NGOs, FPOs and Kavita Mukhis' roster of organic farmers that sell at the farmers' market in Bandra. He very strongly points out that, "I pick *who* rather than from where or what produce because I want to support the right people and create a deeper impact. That is truly the most sustainable way." In contrast to the 'go local' movement in the West, maybe what India needs is a 'filter down' movement; where we ensure the money we pay for our food goes to those that grow it, and that is often our poorest farmers. There are already alternative supply chains that are springing up to fix this problem. Most of them are online market places that connect farmers directly to buyers, suppliers and even second hand farm equipment etc. Take Kisan Network, an app that allows farmers to advertise their crops for free. Once a wholesale buyer has been identified, Kisan Network takes care of the entire supply chain process right from sorting, grading, packaging, processing and delivery. Selvakumar Varadharajan and his wife started Layman Agro Ventures when they couldn't find high quality milk in Bangalore for their infant daughter. Like Varadharajan said, "Indian farmers are desperate to earn competent prices for their produce, while urban Indians struggle to find farm-fresh produce at affordable rates in cities." Agriculture used to be the mainstay of our country, but unfortunately, the number of farmers drops every year (Census 2011 showed a dramatic drop with just 24.6% of the population citing farming as their main occupation as opposed to 31.7% in 2001). We can help by asking where our produce is coming from, and whether your favourite restaurant or veggie vendor knows *who* is growing it. They might not know today, but maybe someday soon, that question will get passed down our dismal supply chain. It is time for us to start supporting our farmers, one meal at a time. Illustration by Namita Sunil. Photograph by Aysha Tanya. First published by The Goya Journal on Sep.

