



A briefing note on

Food in our Lives

**Ideas and Initiatives towards
an Alternative Food System
in India**





I. Context

Food is a primary requirement of life. For millennia, systems of food production and consumption have defined and shaped human communities and their environs in fundamental ways. Entire landscapes have been shaped by our patterns of food gathering, production and consumption. It has also influenced the biodiversity of our planet, pushing certain species to the brink of extinction, while aggressively promoting certain others. Beyond this, food has also been, and continues to be, a tool for wielding power and control. Our choices regarding the food we eat and the stages it passes through before reaching our plates do not play out in a vacuum; being inextricably linked with socio-cultural, political, ecological and economic dimensions of society and well-being.

In a globalised economy, the corporate takeover of land, seeds and markets is leading to a homogenization of diverse food systems, ecological devastation and perpetuation of social injustice at many levels. The global corporate food system has failed to provide safe and nourishing food to the human population despite having an enormous negative impact on our environment. It is a system riddled with inequalities. On the one hand we have people suffering from under-nutrition and hunger, but on the other there are intensifying issues related to 'over-nutrition' and diet-related diseases¹, even while,

1. There are incidences where both over-nutrition and under-nutrition occur in the same individual.

“virtually all of the hungry, many of the over-weight, and others of normal weight are debilitated by a deficiency of essential vitamins and minerals².” Eleven per cent of the world population and 15% of Indians often go to sleep hungry³. At the same time, 50% of the food produced in the world, and 40% of that produced in India goes to waste⁴. The situation is made worse by the precarious condition of our planet which is already experiencing effects of climate change, wide-spread loss of biodiversity, intensifying water-scarcity, toxicity of environments and large-scale dependence on volatile markets.

Calls for a fundamental transformation in food-systems are intensifying globally with demands for a new approach that is environmentally more sustainable and socially equitable. Even today 70% of all food consumed comes from small-holder farmers and workers, and 'more than 80% of smallholders operate in local and domestic food markets, with a majority trading through informal means⁵'. The main thrust of such calls is on **food sovereignty**, the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate

2. See: G. Gardner and B. Halweil, 2000, 'Overfed and Underfed- The global epidemic of malnutrition', Worldwatch paper 150.
3. As per the FAO 2015 report on world hunger.
4. As per the 2013 report on global food waste by the Institution of Mechanical Researchers.
5. See: Nyeleni newsletter, number 27, September 2016.



food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods. Food sovereignty also includes the right of people to define their own food and agricultural systems⁶. Connected to these developments is also the concept of **agroecology**, gaining favor globally with UN endorsements⁷. Although defined variously as a means, a social movement, a discipline of study, or a vision in itself, all definitions of agroecology imply using ecological principles for agricultural practices. Considered as a participatory knowledge-dialogue between indigenous practices and contemporary ecology, it is being advocated as a socially-activating means of revitalizing family-farming and local markets⁸.

II. The Vision for an Alternative Food System

With principles of agroecology and food sovereignty in mind, the vision for an alternative food system for a sustainable and well-nourished future can be described as:

Localized, adequate, nutritious, diverse, affordable food

accessible to all

through protection and promotion of ecologically sustainable and

socially just livelihoods centered around food production, processing, distribution and consumption, with knowledge and cultural pluralisms upheld.

III. About the Note

This briefing note seeks to lay out the Indian context of initiatives and challenges towards achieving this vision. For its elaboration, the note uses a food systems framework, where the food scenario is explored through its politico-economic, ecological, cultural and sociological connections.

There are a number of other possible methods which could have been used for classification. For instance rather than just four divisions it could be broken up further in the context of its linkages with health, art, literature, lifestyle, well-being, economics, ecological footprint, etc. Alternatively, the division could be bio-geographical, connecting the food situation with the geographical features of different landscapes of India. Each of these approaches would have their own merits.

The classification we have used is based on the alternatives framework being discussed as a part of the Vikalp Sangam or Alternatives Confluence process in India⁹. According to this framework, alternatives tending towards equity, justice and sustainability should be

6. As per the declaration of the forum for food sovereignty in Mali in February, 2007.

7. See: UN report of 2011 on 'Agroecology and the Right to Food'.

8. See: Wani M. 2014, 'Sowing Revolution', Himal, 2nd June.

9. See: 'The Search for Alternatives: Key aspects and Principles'- <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/about/the-search-for-alternatives-key-aspects-and-principles/>



built upon a foundation built upon the integration of following five mutually reinforcing dimensions:

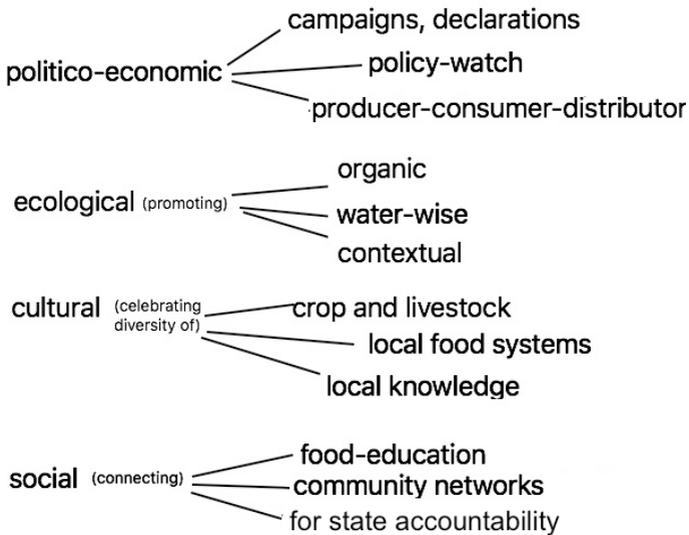
1. Ecological wisdom, integrity and resilience;
2. Social well-being and justice;
3. Direct and delegated democracy;
4. Economic democracy and
5. Cultural diversity and knowledge democracy.

To situate the various initiatives towards an alternative food system, the four dimensions considered within this note complement the five overlapping spheres of the alternatives framework note (with the political and economic realms being merged as a single dimension).

It is important to acknowledge here

that many issues and initiatives may not neatly fall within any one of the above category, spanning over multiple (sometimes all) categories instead. Hence this note should be considered as a mere starting point of a conversation, to be built upon through further discussion and practices. Space for further elaboration can probably be found at the intersections and cross-linkages between the cultural, political, economic, environmental and social aspects of food production and consumption. The initiatives described in the note are indicative rather than exhaustive. Being based on limited available information, it is very likely that the note misses out on some important and relevant examples because of lack of knowledge about those. It is hoped that with time this note can be built upon with additional layers of approaches and illustrations.

The following diagram, though not





comprehensive, tries to represent pictorially the approaches being taken by different initiatives in India that contribute towards achieving the vision for an alternative food system.

IV. The Various Dimensions of a Food System

1. The political economy of food

Food politics refer to political aspects of how food production, distribution and access are controlled. Some of the questions it tries to address are: Why do 3 MNCs have control over 90 % of global food trade? Why is 60% of global food trade between EU/USA and the rest of the world? Which nations benefit by unequal tariff systems?

Corporate takeover of food production and distribution can change self-sufficient producers of food into deprived consumers who struggle to buy food or materials for food production. The diversity and access to uncultivated foods, which have been an important source of nourishment for a large part of the society, are also affected by this politics of control. An important aspect of food politics is to work towards protecting the right of small food producers to continue their means of livelihoods with dignity. In the context of liberalization of food marketing and increasing Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) in the sector, it is also very important to protect our informal small-scale retail sector (like street-vendors), that provides subsistence livelihoods to the distributor and affordable food to the consumers.

Forest foods, pastoralism and small-scale artisanal fisheries have also been significant age-old food systems connected with a way of life. These systems are threatened today by an insecurity of access to their customary forests, grazing lands and fishing grounds. These are also affected by the shift towards a largely cash-based economy and volatile markets. While there are many campaigns for rights of such communities, the relevance of conservation of their food-systems gets little attention at the national level. The negative ecological and equity-related impacts of large-scale fisheries due to their industrialized and export-based nature also need to be tackled.

For at least the last four decades, food sovereignty movements have been demanding short value-chains, democratic control over access to food, minimizing of nutritional inequalities¹⁰ and support for geographically-relevant agri-food systems. Intervention in food politics involves campaigning for better laws and policies, as well as developing networks for producers, consumers and distributors that are rooted in an economic democracy.

1.1 Campaigns and declarations on food sovereignty

Some examples of campaigns to protect the livelihoods and dignity of small scale producers and distributors of food are:

10. Instead of target-oriented approach for e.g. setting targets for producing 260 million tons of food grains.



- ◆ In 2010, more than 400 farmers, activists and artists came together with the message of 'food, farmers, freedom' for a 71-day long walk called Kisan Swaraj Yatra across 21 states. This walk led to the formation of the Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture or ASHA, which has since then emerged as a strong platform for drawing the nation's attention towards the challenges currently being faced in agriculture.
- ◆ In Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, the adivasi, dalit, pastoralist, Fisherfolk and peasant social movements along with co-producers have come together to form the Food Sovereignty Alliance. Their Matthadiguda declaration (February 2015), asserted their collective rights to land, forests, water, air, indigenous seeds and animals, their diverse food cultures, knowledge systems and local markets, with a pledge to safeguard their sacred relationship with Mother Earth and protect this abundance of life for future generations.
- ◆ The India FDI Watch Campaign mobilizes street vendors and small farmer groups to prevent the take-over of India's retail sector by corporations.
- ◆ The Forum Against Free Trade Agreements or FTAs fights neoliberal 'free trade' treaties and policies that would further open the country to transnational food and

agribusiness corporations and their products to the detriment of food sovereignty and security.

- ◆ The Right to Food Campaign has been active in advocacy since 2001 towards realization of every citizen's right to freedom from hunger and malnutrition, with the principle that the primary responsibility of guaranteeing this right lies with the state.
- ◆ In March 2016 in Andhra Pradesh, Mahila Kisan Adhikaar Manch (MAKAAM) or Forum for Women Farmers' Rights ratified the Bapatla Declaration where women farmers resolved to collectively prioritize sufficient food production for self-consumption, to create and secure sustainable livelihoods, and to resist development based on resource exploitation and to reaffirm their right to the use of commons¹¹.

1.2 *Global and National Policy Watchdogs*

Global and national laws and policies have significant implications for food production, distribution and consumption. Some of the national laws connected (directly and indirectly) to food production, distribution and consumption are given in the table below:

11. Pasted from <http://vikalpsangam.org/article/women-farmers-from-demand-recognition-empowerment-and-support-as-farmers/#.VwCMD_l97IU>



Protection of Plant Varieties and Farmer Rights Act 2001	Provides processes for registration for property rights on crop varieties, including farmer varieties.
Biological Diversity Act 2002	Regulates access and benefit sharing mechanisms related to traditional biological resources and knowledge.
The Seeds Act 1966, The Seed (Amendment) Bill 2004	Regulates which seeds get to the market.
The Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Rights) Act 2006	Provides a process for recognizing individual and community forest rights for traditional forest dwelling communities.
Pesticides management Bill 2008	Affects food safety issues. Pending in the parliament.
The Traditional Coastal and Marine Fisherfolk (Recognition of Rights) Act 2009	Similar to Forest Rights Act, for protecting rights of fisherfolk.
Biotechnology Regulatory Authority of India Bill (2011)	For controlling application of biotechnology products including Genetically Modified organisms.
Land Acquisition and Rehabilitation Act 2013	Lays down the process for land acquisition and compensation and rehabilitation for affected persons.
National Food Security Act 2013	Has provisions for subsidized food grains, also called Right to Food Act.

At the global level, a number of Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and bilateral trade and investment agreements (BITS) that have been made or are under discussion undermine seed sovereignty of small farmers¹². India has bilateral investment promotion and protection agreement (BIPA) with 72 countries. In addition, 11 more countries have signed

BIPA with India which are yet to be enforced. These BIPAs imply that these foreign investors enter the country they must be treated just like the domestic investor unless specified explicitly in the pre-establishment stage. Besides this, in July 2017 in Hyderabad, a round of negotiations under the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP) treaty were held, considering removing import duties on 92 per cent

12. See: Bhutani, S 2013, Re-Searching Agriculture in South-Asia, ADARSA.



of the traded commodities¹³. Such agreements and various other decisions taken during international negotiations like the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), the Convention on Biological Diversity-Conference of Parties (CBD COP), and Global Conference on Agricultural Research for Development (GCARD) have implications for Indian farmers and domestic markets.

Many campaigns, networks, researchers and policy-analysts keep a sharp eye on such laws and policies. They try to raise concerns about regressive policies, and advocate for building in features of social and environmental justice into these policies.

1.3 *Advocacy for better state-level policies*

Many state level programmes and policies also have an influence on the food choices of our society. Examples of some progressive state level policies supporting such choices and paving the way for others to emulate:

- ◆ The decentralization of procurement of food items (except rice) for schools in Odisha since January 2011¹⁴;

13. See: Sharma, D 2017, 'RCEP will undo the gains of food self-sufficiency built so assiduously over the decades', <http://devinder-sharma.blogspot.in/2017/08/rcep-will-undo-gains-of-food-self.html>

14. See: http://vikalpsangam.org/static/media/uploads/Stories_PDFs/localgrainprocurement_thehindu05-04-2013.pdf

- ◆ The leasing of land for group farming of food crops¹⁵ by members of the women-based Community Development Society of Kudumbashree, Kerala;
- ◆ The support for organic, small-scale, Rainfed agriculture, by the Society for Elimination of Rural Poverty (SERP) which is sponsored by Andhra Pradesh government;
- ◆ The attempt at supporting single-window village-level purchase and supply of food grains through the idea of Food Security credit line some years ago in undivided Andhra Pradesh¹⁶;
- ◆ Attempts by various states to make the Public Distribution System (PDS), midday meal programme, etc. more nutritious and its implementation more transparent and democratic;
- ◆ State support for conversion of agriculture to organic, as in the case of Sikkim, Andhra Pradesh and Kerala¹⁷.

15. See: <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/lead/from-food-security-to-food-justice/article2848305.ece>.

16. See: <http://223.30.251.85:8090/documents/11369/37104/Food+security+guidelines.pdf/3111fa3f-b3cf-49c5-88fe-c616fb1d72a7;jsessionid=1DB60EF5086F17D5313E109D18289B2D>

17. It is important however to go beyond the rhetoric of 'organic' and also make it ecologically conscious in a holistic manner including crop choice, scale of production and markets.



State-level policies can also contribute at times to the detriment of socio-ecological dimensions. For instance, the nutritional insecurity for some caused by the beef ban in Maharashtra, or the risk of contamination of local varieties because of state-level approval of field trials for GM food crops.

1.4 Platforms for new producer-distributer-consumer relationships

The alternatives framework note¹⁸ of the Vikalp Sangam process describes economic democracy as a situation 'in which local communities and individuals (including producers and consumers, wherever possible combined into one as 'prosumers') have control over the means of production, distribution, exchange, markets; where localization is a key principle, and larger trade and exchange is built on it on the principle of equal exchange; where private property gives way to the commons, removing the distinction between owner and worker'.

In India, a number of attempts can be seen to be focused on building such newer forms of relationships, or re-kindling old ones based on trust. Some examples are given below:

- ◆ In Delhi, Janpahal and the Hawkers Federation are trying to connect the urban poor with street vendors and small farmers to initiate dialogue on food safety.

- ◆ With the objective of providing safe and nourishing food to the urban slum-dwellers of Mumbai, four organizations, viz. Anthra, Award, Swayam Shikshan Prayog and Yuva (Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action) are working towards a viable rural-urban exchange of food and associated knowledge with the districts of Ratnagiri, Raigad, Latur and Osmanabad in Maharashtra.
- ◆ The women farmers of the Deccan Development Society in Zaheerabad, Telangana run a sorghum-based alternative PDS.
- ◆ Direct interactions between organic farmers and buyers are being encouraged through platforms like the Organic Farmers Market, Chennai and Kudrati Kisan Haat in Punjab.

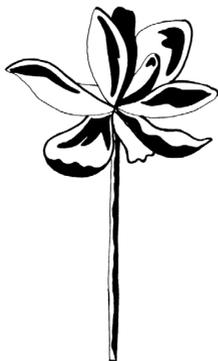
Blurring the urban-rural divide where urban areas are viewed as concrete jungles dependent upon rural areas for all food-production, there has been a rising interest in towns and cities in also connecting to food production through kitchen gardens, rooftop gardens and collective gardening initiatives. Booklets as well as local events on urban gardening help promote the practice. An example is 'Oota from your Thota' (Food from your garden) events in Bangalore. At places, these may also be getting local government support. For instance, people of Vengeri (in Ward 7 of the Kozhikode City Corporation) practice organic farming on private and public land, with the support of the corporation councilor.

18. See: <http://vikalpsangam.org/about/the-search-for-alternatives-key-aspects-and-principles/>



2. Food, energy and Environment

Food systems, whether based on agriculture, livestock herding, fisheries or hunting-gathering draw resources and energy from the environment. They have impacts on, and are impacted by their surrounding biodiversity, land, water, air and climate.



Supporting resilient food production systems becomes particularly important in the face of climate change and the global environmental and agrarian crises. Attempts are being made to build environmental sustainability into food production, processing, marketing and consumption. Resisting and challenging ecologically destructive activities and policies through movements and campaigns also forms an important component of this support.

Some ways in which people are trying to minimize negative environmental impacts of our food systems are listed below:

2.1 *Supporting and promoting ecological agriculture*

The ushering in of the Green Revolution in the 1960s-70s in India and a strong policy push for this paradigm has seen a large spread of chemical-

intensive, industrial agriculture dependent on chemical inputs, hybrid seeds, mechanization and changed cropping patterns. The environmental degradation and associated loss of biodiversity is self-evident and now formally acknowledged¹⁹. At the same time, two-thirds of India's agriculture is rain-fed (i.e. dependent solely upon rain for irrigation) on small parcels of land. Under such conditions synthetic inputs (particularly pesticides and herbicides) are often unaffordable because of which a shift to chemical-intensive agriculture has not yet taken place.

In this context, there is mounting support for methods and concepts like organic farming, permaculture, natural farming, agro-ecology, regenerative agriculture, and low-external-input agriculture through farmer collectives for production and marketing, and even through tireless work of many individual organic farmers. At the national level, there are networks like Organic Farming Association of India and the Alliance for Sustainable and Holistic Agriculture to help organic farmers and also lobby with governments for addressing their issues and concerns. While innovations and new techniques are also considered, a large part of these initiatives is about reviving or strengthening indigenous

19. See: Documents by International Food Policy Research Institute and Pesticides Action Network Asia and Pacific that support this statement www.panap.net/sites/default/files/eyeonirri_irrisnotsogreenrevolution.pdf and <http://www.ifpri.org/publication/green-revolution>



methods of agriculture by making them economically viable. At the core of all these concepts and models, is the acknowledged significance of replacement of fossil-fuel based, energy-intensive and extractive systems with synergized low-impact interactions of humans with their environment through renewable energy systems.

However, the proportion of the farming community that is consciously shifting to or sticking to ecological agriculture is still very small. The predominant narrative of the agricultural department offices and Krishi Vigyan Kendras continues to be in support of chemical fertilizers, pesticides and hybrid seeds. The offices may, sometimes, *also* have an organic wing, but the hub of activity and funds usually lies on the side of the synthetic inputs. It must also be kept in mind that all organic agriculture is not necessarily ecologically conscious, since questions regarding the kind of irrigation it uses (is it electricity-based, or water-intensive?), the source of the seed (is it GM?), the choice of crop (is it locally suited?), the market for the produce (is it destined for distant markets?), and so on can also have considerable impacts on the ecosystem.

2.2 'Water-wise' agriculture

It is time that ministries and agricultural science departments stop considering the continued practices of rain-fed agriculture in India as a 'problem' to be solved by irrigation. Instead there is a need to support this system which is often much more ecologically friendly and

water-conscious. Intensive irrigation using ground water (rather than rain water) has also been linked with salinization of soils. Water wisdom lies in paying due attention to soil moisture, soil health, crop choices, crop-water budgets, and System of Rice Intensification²⁰ (SRI) methodologies. Rejuvenation of dying water-bodies like ponds, canals, wells, lakes and tanks, and conservation of the existing ones is also a pertinent step in that direction.

Some examples of supporting water-wise agriculture:

- Farmer collectives and initiatives supporting dry land ecological farming are crucial contributors. Two such examples are Timbaktu Collective in Andhra Pradesh and Sanghams of Deccan Development Society in Telangana.
- An effort to network at a larger level for learning and advocacy on rainfed agriculture is recently being made through Revitalizing Rainfed Agriculture Network.
- At village level, there have been many community-led initiatives around drought-proofing and collective water management. Ralegan Siddhi and Hivre Bazar in Maharashtra are two famous examples.
- In Mahbubnagar (and subsequently some other areas of Andhra

20. SRI is a labor-intensive method of growing rice with minimum water and a focus on root-growth.



Pradesh), there has been an initiative for collectivization of groundwater. With the support of Watershed Support Services and Activity Network (WASSAN), a Hyderabad-based NGO, they have laid a pipeline grid with a range of 50-100 acres and set up institutions for community-based groundwater regulation.

- In Kachchh, Arid Communities and Technologies (ACT), a Bhuj-based NGO, has trained some local village youth as para-geo-hydrologists to understand the science of groundwater management and to develop strategies for conserving and utilizing the same.

2.3 *Maintaining ecological integrity of landscapes*

Ecological considerations require not going for 'one-size-fits-all' solutions and instead respecting the ecological integrity of systems and landscapes. Desert lands or grasslands are therefore not to be seen as unproductive wastelands waiting for factories/ solar farms to be put up, . Rivers are not just potential sources of hydroelectric energy that must be captured. Coastal areas are not just potential ports for shipping and trade. Forests are not just a mine of natural 'resources'. These ecosystems perform vital functions as not just repositories of food and our connections to socio-cultural, spiritual and physical well-being but also regulators of the overall ecological health of our planet. The individuals, groups, movements

and networks working through local communities to protect these ecosystems at local, regional, national and global levels thus significantly contribute to preserving the ecological integrity of food systems.

3. **Food and Cultural Diversity**

What we eat and the way we eat it is intricately linked with our culture. But at the present intersection of custom and modernity, there is a real danger of falling into a homogenized, micro-nutrient-poor, globalised diet, and in the process losing many local varieties, recipes and associated knowledge-systems capable of leading populations along the natural path to affordable health assurance.

India has an astounding diversity in terms of crop and livestock species and wild foods but at present this diversity is threatened and is fast eroding. Causes include processes of modernization, top-down policies negligent of customary practices, migration, urbanization, pressures of the market economy, changes in land-use, promotion of modern high-input, high-yielding varieties in agricultural research, media influence on food culture, farmers abandoning their fields due to severe agrarian crisis, and changes in cultural and ethical values.

If we consider diversity as the essence of resilience, alternatives need to build on supporting the survival of a cultural diversity of food types and cuisines, and strengthening associated knowledge.

3.1 Celebrating diversity of seed and livestock varieties

Fairs and festivals celebrating local varieties provide channels for the continuous flow, exchange and revitalization of such heritage. These also bring people's issues to the forefront by mobilizing people on common concerns.

Many such festivals²¹ are celebrated throughout the country. Vanastree, a women's collective in the Malnad region of Karnataka celebrates Malnad Mela, an annual festival displaying the numerous local traditional seed varieties they save and grow. The Deccan Development Society has been supporting an annual Mobile Biodiversity Festival for the past 17 years where decorated bullock carts with seed diversity displays tour numerous villages across the district. In the Banni grassland of Kachchh, every year there is Banni Pashu Mela, an annual fair celebrating local livestock



varieties especially the Banni Buffalo breed. Other important groups that organize such melas include: Sahaja Samruda, Bharath Beej Swaraj Manch, Vaagdhara, Chethana, Sahaja Seeds, Living Farms, Basudha, Millet Network of India, Paschim Sridhrakathi Janakalyan Sanghya, Beej Bachao Andolan, Thanal/ Save Our Rice Campaign, and Salim Ali Foundation. There are also exceptional seed conservationists like Debal Deb, Natwar Sarangi and Babulal Dahiya who, despite different methodologies, focus their efforts on saving and propagating traditional seed varieties²².

3.2 Recognizing the role of uncultivated foods in diet and nutrition:

More than 3900 wild plant species are used as subsidiary food by various tribal and other forest and ecosystem based communities in India²³, becoming an important component of nourishment and culture.

A study taken up by Living Farms on 'forests as food producing habitats' explores the dependence of adivasi communities in Odisha on forest

21. For instance see: http://vikalpsangam.org/article/indigenous-seed-food-and-biodiversity-fair-2017/#.Wa_AY7ljHIV and also see: <http://vikalpsangam.org/static/media/uploads/Perspectives/kavyawhatprivatewhatiscommon.pdf>

22. For examples see: <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/debal-deb-the-barefoot-conservator/>, <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/natwar-sarangi-of-odisha-the-individual-revolutionary/> and <http://www.vikalpsangam.org/article/a-farmer-saving-our-heritage-of-seeds/#.WctUxGWO50s>

23. The study was supported by DISHA, SHAKTI and ASHA. http://www.earthisland.org/journal/index.php/eij/article/seed_savior/



foods (both plants and meat) for food security²⁴. The study found that in less than half a year, 121 different kinds of forest foods are harvested by the surveyed households in Rayagada and Sundergadhd districts of Odisha.

Festivals and workshops centered on the value of uncultivated foods help in conservation of this important resource. In a three-days-long forest food festival in December 2014, 1200 varieties of uncultivated forest foods from 13 states were displayed in New Delhi²⁵. It also became a space for putting together a Forest Foods and Ecology declaration - an appeal for empathy and wise governance - to protect our natural heritage, culture, and collective future.

Apart from direct celebrations of food diversity, attempts at forest conservation, particularly through a community-based decentralized form of governance, as envisioned by the Forest Rights Act of 2006, also contribute towards protecting the cultural diversity of forest foods.

3.3 Celebrating knowledge associated with food systems

Methods of preserving foods (fermenting, drying, coating, etc.), cooking, dietary combinations, use of spices, warm and cold foods, slow or fast food systems, pre- and post-natal care foods, weaning foods, food as medicine, etc. are part of several Indian languages, poems and local art forms. Beyond this, there is a wealth of local ecological knowledge amongst traditional farming communities, fisherfolk and pastoralists about methods and activities relevant for interacting with our ecosystem in a more harmonious manner. These lessons can seldom be found in a textbook and are already slowly being lost with loss of knowledge and lack of interest of the younger generations in continuing with these activities. In a very utilitarian sense, will these lessons not be needed to survive in a climate change scenario²⁶? From a universal evolutionary angle, what will a future without these foods, languages and cultures be like?

A contest held by the Marathi Vidnyan Parishad, Pune for recipes using vegetables that people do not get to buy in the markets revealed that even within an urban place like Pune, no less than 150 such vegetables were being used²⁷.

24. See: <http://agrobiodiversityplatform.org/files/2014/10/Forests-as-Food-producing-habitats.pdf>-28th-September.pdf

25. This was organized by Living Farms, Kalpavriksh, SADED, Vividhara, Gandhi Peace Foundation and others, See report: <http://www.slideshare.net/forestfoods/forest-food-and-ecology-festival-december-2014>

26. See: ensia.com/articles/can-grains-of-the-past-help-us-weather-storms-of-the-future/

27. S. Kolhekar, 2015, personal communication, 24 July.



Workshops, participatory rural appraisals (PRAs), festivals, local competitions, networks, collectives or in some cases, cell phone messaging groups and email list-serves have come out as spaces for sharing tidbits of knowledge about food-procuring, recipes and health drawing from traditional and local understandings. In addition, an inspection of both the rich diversity of local foods, as well as the problems associated with junk food, as being done by groups such as Centre for Science and Environment, is also relevant. All of this helps in a collective enrichment of knowledge, and also a re-visiting of our own old memories of food practices which may otherwise be slowly forgotten.

Associated with all of this is also the significance of being alert to threats posed to common knowledge by the politics of a knowledge economy where culture is being commodified and Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) and patents are being used for privatizing knowledge that was customarily held as commons. An example is the patent for pesticidal use of Neem by a US-based multinational company which was challenged on the grounds of it being a common knowledge in India for thousands of years.

4. Food and Society

With the advent of the Green Revolution, industrialization and urbanization, our food production and access have undergone a massive transition in the past half century. There is also the matter of the changing role of

women in societies. While in some cases they have been disempowered in their role in food production and provision through the market orientation towards cash-crops, in other cases their farming burden has intensified with male-migration to urban areas. There are issues of gender bias, and cultural and social dynamics at play here.

Packaged and processed food, mostly controlled by large foreign companies, is more readily available in the rural and urban markets all over India. Food options in restaurants generally neglect the local cuisine, focusing instead on a few stereotypical options. At the same time, there are great disparities within a city or a village in terms of access to nutritious food. Biases based on socio-cultural dynamics and power politics start at the level of family and are etched in gender (where the women members may have poor access to good food), class, caste, community or space, and persist right up to regional and global levels. Alienation of land and insecure tenurial access to forests, farms, pastures and fisheries has led to conversion of self-sufficient producers to deprived consumers. Income-poor rural and urban people are increasingly depending upon junk food or the PDS, both of which often do not guarantee safe and nutritious food.

Because of specialization, globalization and creation of urban settlements away from farms and fields, many of us seem to have lost our food connections. For people with sufficient money, food has become an easily and cheaply available 'commodity', rather than a



treasured part of life. We do not feel personally vulnerable or worried about rains and droughts affecting a crop, the chemicals used, the resources consumed, or the waste that may be generated. But that does not mean that the connections between food producers and consumers, between our dinner plate, the environment and our society, have ceased to exist. And every day, these connections are influenced by local decisions as well as global policies, including the corporate takeover of food production and distribution channels.

All of us - even the producers - are consumers. Consumer choices have a great role to play in shaping the food production scenario to make it socially and ecologically more conscious. For this purpose, groups, organizations and individuals raising awareness about the social and ecological impacts related to processed food, packaging, food grown within industrial farming monocultures and food traveling over long distances have an important role to play.

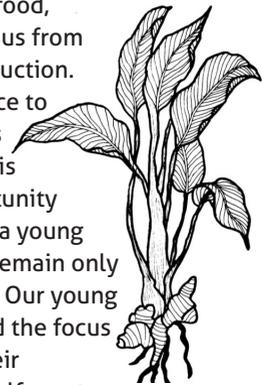
In the midst of this, movements call for societal transformations through re-designing our formal methods of education, demanding state accountability for food security, and strengthening trust-based old and new community networks.

4.1 *Connecting learning systems with food*

Even as the present formalized education system stands disconnected from matters of environmental and

social justice in food, it also distances us from actual food production.

To build resilience to face what awaits humanity, there is no better opportunity than to begin at a young age; else it will remain only as fringe efforts. Our young are our hope and the focus should be on their nurturing and welfare at all times, especially so in these troubled times. Connection of education with food at both conceptual and experiential levels is important as what we learn at a young age has a profound impact on shaping our beliefs and approaches towards environment and society.



Some examples where this connection of learning and food is being acknowledged are given below:

- The Adharshila Learning Centre in Sakad village, Madhya Pradesh, has 6.5 acres of farmland where teachers and children together grow cereals, pulses and vegetables.
- The Ragi Project launched by an alternate school, Poorna, in Bangalore, aims to teach students how to grow their food, integrating health, ecological, economical, and social concerns; and encourages them to critically examine the connections between people, food, and their environment.
- In around 150 schools of Medak, Telangana, students have been growing vegetables for their midday



meals as a part of a collaborative project between CEE, UNICEF and Department of Education, Medak.

- Ten tribal residential schools in Antagarh, Bastar have developed fruit and vegetable organic kitchen gardens with the support of the district administration.
- Even the Central Board for Secondary Education (CBSE) is asking schools to form canteen management committees. These are supposed to make sure that canteens serve healthy food rather than 'junk' food like soft-drinks, burgers and chips.
- Making significant changes in the education curriculum to reflect this orientation is another approach. For instance, the environmental science book series 'Our Land our life' of Uttarakhand are based on a practical curriculum developed by Uttarakhand Seva Nidhi. A national framework with the same title as well as a subsequent practice guide 'Tending a schoolyard garden'²⁸ has been prepared, connecting food and education.

28. Tending a Schoolyard Garden is an introductory handbook (based on best practices from field tests for the implementability of skill-based education as outlined in the book *Our Land Our Life* of curricular ideas of organic farmers) by Nyla Coelho, published by NEG-FIRE (<http://www.negfire.org/>).

4.2 State accountability for food security

The state must be held responsible for protecting the right of all citizens to freedom from hunger and malnutrition. In the words of Right to Food Campaign, that involves, 'not only equitable and sustainable food systems but also entitlements relating to livelihood security such as right to work, land reform and social security.' In a progressive move towards this, triggered by persistent popular campaigns, the National Food Security Act (NFSA) was passed in 2013. The Act converts the existing food security programs (PDS, midday meal and Integrated Child Development Services scheme) into legal entitlements and aims to provide subsidized grains to approximately two thirds of India's population. It cannot be seen as a panacea for all the prevailing problems plaguing our food systems. Its effective implementation and prevention from dilution can mean significant contribution towards removing hunger through a well-functioning PDS system, strengthened child nutrition services and maternity benefits for women. In the present political atmosphere²⁹, this requires persisting with strong popular campaigns and using democratic means for demanding state accountability for food security.

29. This refers to the recommendations of HLC report on Food Corporation of India in August 2014 for curtailing NFSA, and to repeated discussions on replacing PDS with cash-transfer, both of which threaten food security.



4.3 Community networks based on trust

While on the one hand, the struggle of farmers, pastoralists, fisher-folk and forest dwellers for protecting common ecological resources and knowledge practices from state or private takeover persists through campaigns and advocacy, there is a parallel rebuilding of networks for sustainable livelihoods and fostering new types of urban-rural, producer-consumer, relationships based on community trust and sharing.

For example:

- Community seed banks make available seeds of traditional crop varieties to farmers free of cost, with the common practice of farmers paying back twice the quantity of seeds borrowed.
- Farmers' collectives and cooperatives like the Timbaktu Collective, or Sanghams of Deccan Development Society make it economically more viable for small organic farmers to come together to produce food crops which are then processed, packaged and sold to the market.
- The model of community supported agriculture, as in the case of Gorus Organic Farming Association in Pune district, depends upon an assurance from consumers that they would buy what the farmers produce.
- There are also other systems based on mutual trust for the production and marketing side, such as the Participatory Guarantee System

(PGS). PGS presents an approach towards assuring food quality through a peer-review process based on trust and collective responsibility. It is being practiced by a number of initiatives for assuring organic produce³⁰.

Concluding remarks

This has been an attempt to piece together a picture of a food system that is not wholly articulated, or even structurally visible; a system that is constantly being molded and jostled through an inter-play of a diverse set of actors, sometimes conflicting and sometimes complementing each other. By no stretch of imagination is this note an exhaustive laying out of all the present complex elements of the food system and their overlaps. And as individual and collective ideals evolve, it is possible that many of the ideas and initiatives mentioned in the note would become irrelevant, obsolete and inappropriate. This note must only be considered as a humble attempt by the author, with the generous help of various commentators, to view the limited available information on food-systems with the lens of the alternatives framework emerging from the Vikalp Sangam process. The idea behind Vikalp Sangams or Alternatives Confluences is

30. Some examples of such initiatives are Dharani (Andhra Pradesh), Sangham Organics (Telangana), Chetna Vikas Swarajya Trust (Uttar Pradesh), Muskaan Jaivik Kheti Self Help Group (Himachal Pradesh) and Gorus Organic Farming Association (Maharashtra).



to provide a platform to constructively challenge and learn from each other, build alliances, and collectively evolve alternative futures. The motivation for this note, in fact, comes from the idea of organising food-thematic Vikalp Sangams³¹ where people working

on diverse aspects of food can come together for a collective process of cross-fertilization of ideas, sharing of experiences, enunciating of linkages between different aspects and hopefully better envision of our food futures.

31. At the time of publishing this note, one such food sangam had already been organized in Muniguda, Odisha in September 2016, and another such sangam in Bajju, Rajasthan was planned for October 2017.

Briefing Note

September 2017

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an Alternative Food System
in India**

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