

Many Questions for the Dinner Table

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How do we produce food? How do we distribute it? And how do we consume it? These are questions that are increasingly understood to be at the core of sustainable economies. And how we regard food, think about it and treat it, is clearly at the heart of sustainable well-being.

There is no time like the present in India to be thinking aloud on these issues. We are on the verge of a revolution in food retailing, procurement and distribution — much as the countries of the North were two decades ago. So we are at a vantage point when it comes to learning. It is critical that we understand from the actual experience of the developed world why they have put so many questions on the table now, about how they have dealt with food.

As we get more and more variety into our food markets at more and more affordable prices for those who can get in, we need to ask if this is a double-edged sword. Can we as consumers afford to be placid anymore? Here are some facts that could serve as wake-up calls:

Langoustines (large prawns) harvested in Scotland are flown to Thailand to be shelled by cheap labour, and flown back to be sold in Scotland. The United States exported \$666 million worth of sugar and imported sugar worth \$188 million in 2002. And this is true of many countries which import and export the same product.

Far too many of the hungry people in the world are themselves producers of food. Obesity or self-starvation co-exist with real starvation— for example, in Lesotho 15 per cent of children under the age of five are underweight for their age and 21 per cent are overweight (WHO 2001).

What does all this mean for me, as I go to the market (or send someone there) to procure food for my family?

There are many complex ecosystems at play here, and many choices to be made about our development models in the face of urgent climate change issues. But no one in his right mind can make choices at a moment-to-moment level keeping the planet in mind. And so, while there is no one good answer, there are many good questions — maybe some that need to be discussed at the next family mealtime, whenever that might be. These are real dilemmas that the developed countries are beginning to ponder, and which the argumentative Indian can take to heart.

The first question has to be: How much should we eat? Should I eat more because I can afford it? If not, how do I define my limits?

And the bigger question, a very personal one that it might be even offensive to ask. Yet, we have seen that obesity is growing in India with its attendant diseases, such as diabetes. Hot on its heels is the bewilderment about real hunger and starvation in India. And while we cannot evoke the middle-class American mother's rebuke to her children in the 1960s to eat well because children are starving in India, we can begin to ask whether there is indeed any correlation between excess and access.

The second question, then, is: What should we eat? Traditional foods versus aspirational foods — do we know why we eat what we do? Food habits across the world have always been in transition. The tomatoes and potatoes that we claim in our cuisine today came from other shores in a different kind of globalisation. What dictates our choices today? Is it convenience? Is it nutrition? Is it access? Is it one upmanship?

The bigger question: Why are both farmers and consumers, even in the lower socio-economic classes, deserting local crops such as ragi? Is it peer pressure? Or is it due to command-and-control procurement, with high prices for some crops and not for others?

The third question: What is a good diet? This question has become more complex than ever before in human history, due to the development of standards and regulatory frameworks around personal consumption. The market has traded very well on fears that we may not be consuming this 'adequate diet.' "Am I getting enough Vitamin K? And what is Vitamin K?" Is choice a burden as much as a relief?

The bigger question: Why do so many people not have enough to eat? And why, even among people eating at least two meals a day, is there so much malnutrition?

Underlying these three big questions are even more questions, as more and more evidence crops up of a failed model, or at least an immature one. There are questions of equity and fair prices, and of proper accounting of the ecosystem services used in the production and the journey of food that will shake the very foundation of the business- as-usual paradigm. Yet, while we wait for the big changes to happen, there are small actions to be put into effect.

And so, is it worthwhile for us as we gather to eat our daily meal, to think about some key issues about the food at our table?

Organic: How is this item of food grown? Is it high on pesticides that can harm me? Should we try to eat more organic foods? How will we know they are organic? Am I prepared to pay more?

Local: Should we try to eat more of what is grown locally? Locally across what geography? Is Ratnagiri local in Bangalore compared to London when I want to eat Alphonso mangoes? Or is it best to eat locally grown Neelam? How can I count food miles before every meal?

Vegetarian: How much meat should I consume? Since the meat industry has been harmful to the environment and inimical to animal welfare, and since overexploitation of fish is drying up the catch, should I go vegetarian? Or can I avoid red meat?

Carbon footprints and other global issues: Is my meal sustainable? For my family and for the planet? How much energy, water, land and other inputs went into my green beans? Or the corn I roasted for the kids?

These questions, if posed aggressively, are enough to turn family meals into nightmares. But if asked with some gentleness and a desire to find a better path, perhaps they can encourage families to dream. After all, these choices are real ones and put the locus of control firmly in our own hands as we lift them to our mouths. We should never underestimate the power and will of individuals, or that of united families. And as families begin to find some answers, governments and markets will listen and shape their policies, and their supply chains, to match them.