Re-imagining food

Do we have the stomach for it?

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Mosaic of foodgrains from dryland Telangana, Southern India © Ashish Kothari

"Worthless people live only to eat and drink; people of worth eat and drink only to live", said Socrates. Wisdom, or a wisecrack?

In a world in which a couple of billion people don't have adequate nutritious food, while another billion or more fall ill due to overconsumption or a diet of junk food, Socrates' distinction makes deadly sense, though reality is not so black and white. Food, in all its ecological, economic, socio-cultural, and political dimensions, is one of the most serious issues of our time.

At no point has this become clearer than in the current Covid-related global crises. A July 2020 report by Oxfam warns that unless urgent measures are taken, starvation related to Covid-related disruption of food production and supply may kill more people than the virus itself. It said: "The pandemic is the final straw for millions of people already struggling with the impacts of conflict, climate change, inequality and a broken food system that has impoverished millions of food producers and workers."

What this points to is a lesson that food and human rights activists have argued for decades: if there is hunger, it is not due to lack of food, but lack of justice. Whether the world can stave off the dire predictions that Oxfam has made, will depend on how seriously we take this observation.

Food is a multi-dimensional issue

While food is, first and foremost, a matter of survival for all species, it is also much more. It is fundamental to cultural life, with humans exhibiting an enormous diversity of procurement, processing, preparing and cooking it. In India, it is said that the cuisine may change subtly or dramatically every few kilometres. Language, rituals, behaviour, norms and so much more are associated with different cuisines; even what is "worth" eating is influenced by cultural (and social) beliefs or relations. Then, it is an economic issue, enbedded in relations of production, trade, and consumption. It is a deeply political issue, as in who takes decisions and how. It is an issue of technology and knowledge, with both of these becoming the means of asserting autonomy or, conversely, domination. Increasingly as we move toward automation and artificial substitutes for everything in our lives, the technological component becomes even more dominant. And finally, perhaps most important, it is an ecological issue, in that despite all the "promise" of technology, we remain fundamentally dependent on healthy ecosystems, land, and biological diversity for our food security.

In all the above, one comes face to face with the underlying structures of power – patriarchy, capitalism, statism, racism, casteism, and anthropocentrism – which determine decision-making regarding food. As there is no more powerful a way of subjugating people than by controlling its source of and access to food, these structures are implicated right from the individual family to the globe as a whole, in the inequalities that characterise relations around food.

And so if we want to move towards greater justice and ecological sustainability with regard to food, we need people's movements and imaginaries that can both challenge the structures of injustice and unequal power, as also replace them with relations of equality and fairness. Not only amongst humans, but between humanity and the rest of nature also. Movements that assert (or re-assert) democratic control and sovereignty over food, sustain diverse food cultures, revive and conserve the ecosystems and biodiversity that sustains our food security, struggle for socially just relations, and ensure that everyone has access to adequate, nutritious and satisfying food.

Initiatives towards food justice

At a recent webinar on *Food, Economy and Ecology*, organised by several people's networks and organisations in India as part of a series called Re-imagining the Future: towards a Post- Covid economy, a number of initiatives towards food justice were described:

In Nagaland, north-east India, the women's organisation North East Network (NEN) has helped sustain or revive traditional farming practices, prioritising domestic food security; during Covid times this enabled communities to be resilient, as also reach local markets.

In Telangana, southern India, the Deccan Development Society (DDS), comprising about 5000 women belonging to Dalit and adivasi (indigenous) communities, amongst India's most oppressed or marginalised, has achieved food sovereignty over the last three decades. In the Covid period none of these families had food shortage; instead, they contributed several thousand kilos of grains to the district relieft measures.

In the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal, the Karen indigenous community (migrated from Burma many generations back), are reviving their traditional food cultures, making them relevant again for the youth through various means including starting a slow food Karen cuisine restaurant with the help of the civil society organisation Dakshin.

Also in Telangana, the Food Sovereignty Alliance, India is facilitating farmers and pastoralists to challenge traditional caste and gender discrimination, reclaim land, assert food cultures (including eating beef in the midst of a right wing state-supported Hindu agenda which has made the cow a symbol for marginalising Muslims and Dalits), localise trade in milk and crops, and enable youth to do collective farming as a viable livelihood.

In tribal villages of Bhimashankar Sanctuary in Maharashtra, western India, local women's groups with help from environmental action group Kalpavriksh have celebrated wild food festivals over the last few years; these and many other communities including DDS, NEN, and Living Farms are reviving the crucial role such foods play in the nutritional and cultural lives of people.

Complementing several other such movements and initiatives in India, are thousands around the world. In Bangladesh, for instance, several thousand farmers are part of the Nayakrishi Andolan, achieving food sovereignty and security, and faring well during the Covid lockdown. In Cuba, sustainable urban farming provides a substantial part of Havana's food requirements, and several movements of "re-commoning" are providing opportunities for city-dwellers to grow food in shared plots. One of the world's largest people's organisations representing over 200 million farmers, La Via Campesina, stresses on small-holder, sustainable farming with domestic food sovereignty as the highest priority. An umbrella term for these and others is agroecology, though locally and nationally they have diverse terms and forms such as permaculture, natural farming, organic farming, and others. And then there is the global Slow Food movement, emphasising local food cultures and traditions, and awareness about the implications of food choices. These and many more, diverse approaches to food justice are embedded in a pluriverse of alternative movements of indigenous peoples and other local communities, or civil society, around the world. Importantly, such approaches are distinct not only from conventional, chemical-based, large-farmer oriented models (e.g. India's Green

Revolution), but also from "solutions" being put forward by international agencies and corporations like "climate smart agriculture", a cleverly greenwashed form of corporate-controlled, high-tech farming. Many farmers movements and civil societies organisations, local to global, are resisting such greenwashing as also the unfair, unsustainable trade, production and consumption practices that undermine food justice.

The right to food

While assertions of food sovereignty and sustaining or reviving community level food cultures are the most important fulcrum of achiving food justice, it is also necessary to hold the state accountable to its responsibility for food provisioning to those who do not have the means to sustain their own food security. Across much of the global south (which includes millions of vulnerable people in so-called "developed" countries too, as we have seen all too painfully in Covid times), structural inequalities and short-term agricultural policies like the Green Revolution have in many cases increased the vulnerability of the poor. Millions of small and marginal farmers have been displaced or dispossessed, forced to abandon their lands. In India, the percentage of farmers with land has decreased, and that of landless farm labourers increased. Over 300,000 in India alone have committed suicide out of economic desperation.

Overall, with 90% of India's workforce in the informal sector, the majority of whom have little economic security to fall back on, the impacts of economic lockdowns or other such crises are immediate and catastrophic, with food insecurity increasing. This is on top of a background situation in which a hefty section of the population in any case did not have enough to eat. In such a situation, the state has to fulfil its responsibility of providing for the most marginalised and impoverished. But since this cannot be left to the state alone, people's movements have fought for a legal right to food. Such a right is internationally recognised, e.g. in Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. In India over a decade of people's advocacy and judicial action as part of the Right to Food Campaign finally led to the National Food Security Act 2013, making it mandatory for the government to make arrangements to provide adequate food to the needy. Unfortunately both this, and the previous programme of the Public Distribution System (PDS), meant to make reasonably priced foodgrains available to the poor, have been plagued by inefficient, uncaring, and corrupt implementation.

In any case, it is important to realise that food security is a partial approach to the problem; food sovereignty goes beyond that to assert democratic control over food. Society has to move towards a just system in which people can either self-provision like the women of North East Network and Deccan Development Society, or have the economic means of purchasing or obtaining the food from the market or community linkages. And the more one localises these relationships, the more the possibility of people having control over such a basic need.

This then also means challenging and throwing out the kind of corporate or state control over food that has only grown manifold in the last few decades, and in particular monopolies over seeds and other agricultural inputs, knowledge, and credit, and the increasing concentration of political power in the hands of big corporations that are in collusion with the world's governments. It also means urgent redistribution, for the world grows enough food to feed everyone, but tens of millions still do not have access to it. In India, about 80 million tonnes of foodgrains are stocked up in official storehouses, but their distribution to the hungry has remained limited by bureaucratic procedures and corruption, even during Covid lockdown time when hunger saw a spurt. And it means making global institutions like the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) accountable to the peoples of the world; its own role has been at times very progressive, e.g. in the passage of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas, but also at times regressive, aligning with technocratic or corporate perspectives.

Re-imagining food justice

Based on the experience of the ground level movements mentioned above (and many thousands more across the world), one can posit the following points for a world that ensures food justice:

- Continued and heightened resistance to the institutions destroying food cultures, commons and resilience, including the underlying structures mentioned above, and processes they give rise to such as unfair and unsustainable global trade, bilateral and multilateral agreements, and national policies;
- Recognising the central role of women from the farm (or pasture or forest or wetland) to national and global policy, bringing in their knowledge, perspectives and capacity for prioritising care and solidarity;
- Facilitating collectives especially at the level of communities, to share operations and knowledge, assert rights and decision-making powers, and sustain food cultures;
  Protecting the ecological, physical, and knowledge commons relevant to food, and re-commoning lands, biological and genetic resources, and knowledge that have been privatised;
- Carrying out radical land reforms to redistribute land equitably, recognise women's rights to land, and enable community governance over common lands;
  Converting all food growing to organic, ecologically sensitive, and biologically diverse methods, centred on the small producer;
- Recognising and enshrining in law, community or collective rights to these commons, and the responsibility to sustain them;
- Diversifying livelihoods, in every settlement and community, linked to food and agriculture, including opportunities for processing, and other manufacturing and service occupations, enabling self-reliance;

- Sustaining (and reviving, where eroded) the diversity of food cultures (including those associated with uncultivated or wild foods), including associated people's identity, and recognising that they are all worthy of respect so long as they are not impinging of others' freedoms or leading to ecological havoc;
- Localising, or re-localising, essential aspects of food production, trade and consumption, such that food needs (and livelihoods linked to food) are met for all from a limited region;
- Eliminating social and cultural inequities and heirarchies associated with food, including those of gender, ethnicity, caste, and "race";
- Recognising, in constitutions and laws, the universal right to food as a fundamental and enforceable right, with mechanisms to hold governments accountable for this;
- Ensuring democratic control of all technologies related to food, including for growing and processing, and promoting only those that are people-centred, ecologically responsible, and respectful of life;
- Respecting and promoting cultures that enshrine ethical and/or spiritual relationship with the rest of nature, including the land and sea, natural ecosystems, seeds and breeds;
- Integrating the above perspectives and approaches in all educational and learning processes, especially for children and youth;
- Recognising the central role of youth in all matters related to food, including their visions and aspirations relating to food justice.

All the above, of course, are easier said than done. In a world where food matters are dominated by powerful corporations and nation-states, and where vast numbers of the public believe that its entirely legitimate for such a situation to exist, struggles for food justice are very, very uphill. But they are not impossible, as thousands of examples of resistance and alternatives around the world demonstrate. Ongoing global crises including Covid-19, have created opportunities for such initiatives to gain legitimacy, to challenge the deep faults in the system, and demand that food justice be made as central to human well-being as the stomach is to the body.

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Author profile

1. Kuzguncuk bostan (market garden), food production by city famlies, Istanbul, Turkey © Ashish Kothari
2. Wild foods festival, Bhimashankar, Maharashtra, Western India © Ashish Kothari
3. Food production plots in Bern, Switzerland, one of many urban agriculture initiatives in Europe © Ashish Kothari
4. Dishes made of wild vegetables, Bhimashankar, Maharashtra, Western India © Ashish Kothari
5. Food diversity at a farmers' market, Maine, USA, connecting farmers and consumers directly © Ashish Kothari
6. North East Network member with food diversity display, at Food Confluence, Bikaner, Rajasthan, Western India © Ashish Kothari

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