

DINING ON WILD FOODSTUFFS

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Northeast India's Jhum agriculture grew 20 different food crops on the same piece of land |
Photo Credit: RITU RAJ KONWAR

Great emphasis is laid on the concept of biodiversity in our times. The importance of preserving biodiversity has been accepted in the policy frameworks of most Governments. It is therefore ironic that the food eaten by the people of the world has become extremely low in diversity. Rice, wheat, maize, and sugar provide over 50% of the total calorie intake of all of us.

The fresh produce sections of our supermarkets also reflect this trend and carry a monotonously limited selection of vegetables.

This reduction in "dietary diversity" influences the quality of our diets. Eating food from many different food groups improves nutrition. But the practice of monoculture – growing one crop or vegetable on large tracts of land – only reduces "agricultural biodiversity". One alternative, to transport food groups from distant regions, raises costs and carries a heavy environmental penalty.

Farmers with small holdings, Shepherds on pastoral lands and tribal populations that practice agroforestry are major contributors to nutritional variety in our country. When we talk of local varieties, we usually refer to vegetables and crops provided on a small scale by these people. The choice, varying from region to region, can be quite extraordinary. In South India, we have leafy greens that are rich in iron and calcium, such as the Green Amaranth (Tamil, kuppi keerai; Hindi, jungle chaulayi) and Leucas (Tamil, thumbai; Sanskrit, Drona pushpi). Starchy tubers, such as east Indian arrowroot (Tamil, kuva or ararut-kizhargu; Hindi, tikhur) whose powdered tubers (also called Travancore starch) are nutritious and particularly good for sensitive stomachs.

More commonly available, and a vitamin C powerhouse, is the Indian gooseberry (Tamil, nelli; Hindi, amla). In Central India, we have the madhuca or Indian butter tree (Tamil, illupai; Hindi, mahua) whose flowers are edible, and the seeds have oil. The khejri, the state tree of Rajasthan (Tamil, parambai) has pods that make the tasty sighri bhaaji, while also warding off desertification. All of us probably have a favourite 'wild' vegetable, fruit, berry, or root that is rarely found.

The indigenous people of Northeast India practiced a form of agriculture, called Jhum, in which

about 20 different food crops would be grown on the same piece of land. This form of cultivation is a total antithesis of modern agricultural practices but offers plenty of diversity in their diets. Sadly, this form of cultivation is losing ground. Researchers at the Central Agricultural University at Pasighat in Arunachal Pradesh have documented that the area under Jhum cultivation, in the West Garo district alone, had shrunk from 1,328 sq. km in the year 2000 to 112 sq. km. In 2015. Areca nut, black pepper and rubber became the preferred crops on this land (Pandey et al, Food Security, 2022).

The consumer and his tastes influence the availability of a wide variety of wild varieties. Adding wood apples (velam pazham) and Jamuns (nagai) will only enhance the nutritive quality of your diet while helping small growers.

(The article was written in collaboration with Sushil Chandani, who works in molecular modelling)

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