

COMMENTARY

Engaging rural youth in strengthening the local food movement in India

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In India, traditional agriculture has historically been a subsistence-oriented, labor-intensive, closed-loop, and varied production system. Farming has long formed the foundation of the rural economy and served as a means of subsistence for local communities. Until a few decades ago, rural youth were actively choosing farming as a career, serving as the main workforce in a variety of agricultural enterprises. However, most of today's youth do not want to work in low-value agricul-

ture. Instead, they migrate to urban areas, within or outside of their home states where there are not many opportunities for quality work, social services, or protection. Responding to these constraints through more inclusive changes in rural areas and through the alignment of rural-urban linkages is a significant challenge. It is crucial to look at opportunities and address obstacles in order to ensure that agriculture is economically viable and provides year-round employment for young people in rural India.

In our recent exploratory case study on hill farming (Rana & Bisht, 2023), we investigated ways in which young people from rural areas could be included in the changes being made to the food system. Youth across the globe are demanding three fundamental changes to improve access to nutritious foods and enhance food system resilience: (a) ensure that young people are part of the necessary overhaul and widespread transformation of food systems; (b) enhance food system resilience through food system transformation; and (c) enforce food system transformation through healthier and more sustainably produced and consumed foods (Glover &

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In 2018, Dr. I. S. Bisht superannuated from active services as principal scientist and professor, ICAR–National Bureau of Plant Genetic Resources, Pusa Campus, New Delhi, India. After retiring, Dr. Bisht worked as consultant from 2018 through 2023 in a UNEP-GEF Project titled “Mainstreaming agricultural biodiversity conservation and utilization in agricultural sector to ensure ecosystem services and reduce vulnerability in India,” jointly operated by the Alliance of Bioversity International and CIAT and the Indian Council of Agricultural Research (ICAR). Dr. Bisht is presently working as a freelance researcher on traditional farming and food systems, and more particularly, on aspects of indigenous food sovereignty, eco-nutrition and community empowerment.

Sumberg, 2020). Building resilience to overcome vulnerabilities in a secure food system necessitates large-scale shifts to sustainable, nature-based production. Since the right to food is universal, addressing political and environmental challenges demands robust, multistakeholder efforts.

Furthermore, India achieved food independence through the conventional “productivity-driven” agriculture of the Green Revolution, but with only two staple crops—wheat and rice—at the cost of the environment and the socio-economic system. The multi-crop model that prevailed in other traditional agroecosystems was largely ignored in favor of the mono-crop model. Unreliable and rapidly declining energy and mineral resources have turned agriculture into a carbon-intensive industry, contributing to climate change and leading to more profound ecological and existential issues (Das, 2019; Kumar, 2019).

Agroecology is a dynamic concept that recently has gained traction in the fields of science, agriculture, and policy (Bisht et al., 2022). Agroecology is increasingly promoted as a way to transform food systems through the introduction of ecological principles into agriculture, the use of renewable resources, and the implementation of socially responsible food systems where consumers have control over what they consume, how it is produced, and where it is produced.

In this commentary, I focus on two key areas where the local food system can be strengthened through the involvement of rural youth, who can bring sustainability to farming and food systems:

1. Agroecology-based Community Kitchens

In November 2021, the government of India started drafting a national policy to set up community kitchens throughout the country. This step was taken in response to the public interest litigation (PIL) filed in the Supreme Court by social activists wanting to combat malnutrition and hunger. Community kitchens provide food either for free or for a nominal charge. Several state governments and a few NGOs have already set up community kitchens to feed the poor. During the COVID-19 lockdown, community kitchens run by women self-help groups (SHG) provided food to the most poor and vulnerable. Even though several states

have community kitchens, there is no expansive national policy, and as a result, only some areas have access to free or subsidized food.

The majority of the state-run community kitchens in India serve food for free or at subsidized rates. The food grains for the community kitchen are sourced through public distribution systems (PDS). The government also currently provides free rations to 813.5 million poor people under the National Food Security Act (NFSA) of India. Tons of food grains rot every year at the Food Corporation of India (FCI). But by supplying the food grains to poor people or to community kitchens, the waste of food grains can be prevented. Conventional food, which is produced using agrochemicals and pesticides, is procured from farmers by government agencies, and is paid at a rate that is unfair to farmers and farm laborers who struggle to obtain dignified livelihoods. Charity food projects often rely on donations to provide food to those in need, without taking into account the social and economic disparities within food systems that affect farmers and consumers.

What is really needed is a transformative community kitchen based on agroecology that can play a key role in the radical transformation of the whole food system, including relationships both with producers and urban consumers. In several cities across the Global North for the past decade, grassroots efforts have addressed the many gaps in current food systems—especially the lack of equitable and regular access to nutritious, high-quality, high-nutrient, and culturally appropriate food for a growing number of underprivileged, vulnerable, and marginalized populations. Programs range from food banks and soup kitchens to social supermarkets and community kitchens. While the current inequitable and unsustainable food systems were exacerbated by COVID-19, there was also a surge in community-led food support projects, many of which focus on solidarity cooking. While it is commendable that surplus food or food waste is being used to feed those in need during emergency situations, normalizing the sale or distribution of surplus food as “cheap food” overlooks the fact that food surplus occurs because the powerful retail sector “purchases” agricultural produce at inflated farm prices at the expense of farm work-

ers' right to a dignified existence. Even though overproduction is a major contributor to environmental degradation (roughly 30–50% of the world's food is wasted), more farmers are opting out of farming each year due to their inability to make a livelihood from it.

For this reason, one of the key challenges for community kitchens is to get rid of food coming from the public distribution system (food waste), while at the same time providing access to an agroecological diet that is nutritious and produced and sold in a fair and ethical manner. Smallholder farmers in most of India's traditional agroecosystems are better equipped to grow agroecological food locally. There is therefore great potential for agroecology-based community kitchens to become sites of decolonization and restructuring of entire food systems. Neighborhood farmers can provide culturally appropriate, high-quality, and nutritious food through partnerships with community supported agriculture (CSA) models (producer-consumer alliances). By applying the CSA model (Bisht et al., 2020), community kitchens can enable wider access to healthy food, which would otherwise only be available to the middle and upper classes.

A transformative community kitchen based on the principles of agroecology can play a pivotal role in the radical restructuring of the entire food system, including the relationships between producers and urban consumers. By making food widely available, it would address unequal access to healthy food for all. Cooking and eating together can break the patriarchal and individualistic approach to food. By sourcing food from local agroecological farmers, culturally appropriate food is made available to a greater number of people. Local marketing and direct delivery of local farm produce to youth SHG-run community kitchens and school, university, and hospital cafeterias would help to revitalize traditional smallholder agriculture and create more employment opportunities for rural youth at the community level.

2. Culinary Agri-ecotourism

Ecotourism is well developed in India, and agri-ecotourism is a growing sector with huge potential to revive traditional agriculture and provide

employment to rural youth. Rural culinary tourism, or agri-ecotourism, is a symbiotic relationship between tourism and agriculture, in which farmers and farms play a key role in development and contribute to a more prosperous rural economy. Agri-ecotourism utilizes rural culture as a tourism resource. It is taking on new dimensions as a potential source of income and employment. Agri-ecotourism is an important opportunity to develop niche markets for tourists and consumers, based on new food and nutrition experiences with traditional crops and new educational experiences through exposure to different agricultural production systems. The combination of tourism and agriculture in agri-ecotourism is an environmentally friendly and socially responsible form of tourism.

India's traditional agricultural landscapes have enough potential for tourism combined with agriculture. Agricultural ecotourism involves native peoples whose farming and herding are part of their customary knowledge and cultural identity and can be experienced firsthand. India is a country of rich cultural diversity, and its rural areas are a treasure trove of indigenous food traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation. These culinary practices not only reflect the diversity of the native communities of India, but also demonstrate their deep connection with nature and a sustainable lifestyle. Experiencing authentic local cuisine is considered an important part of what makes an eco-holiday enjoyable and memorable; therefore, traditional food plays an important role in agricultural ecotourism. The participation of young people in agri-ecotourism, particularly in homesteads as a livelihood strategy, is seen as important for their employment prospects. Community-based ecotourism or agricultural ecotourism that provides a livelihood strategy—which can be managed and sustained at the local level—has a greater chance of truly benefiting the local population, in particular the rural youth.

In addition to foreign tourists, many domestic tourists currently prefer to travel within their own country, rather than abroad due to various uncertainties. More and more tourists prefer lesser-known nature-friendly areas.

Homestays in farms and nearby villages are being developed in remote rural areas in response

to large-scale migration of rural youth, the weakening of the local economy, and the growth of tourism. Culinary homestay tourism aims to revive traditional subsistence farming and preserve native food culture and cuisine.

Community-based tourism focuses on an intense host-guest interaction experience that often exposes guests to various tangible and intangible aspects of the host's food culture. Research on the relationship between food and tourism focuses mainly on the perspective of the tourists, so the host's point of view must be investigated, especially in regard to the impact of tourism on the local food culture. The country's tourism industry recognizes its potential beyond its rich culture and heritage, and is now capitalizing on such culinary travel

opportunities. The focus is on traditional food systems, the inherent wisdom of culinary practices, and connecting with what we eat.

Moreover, the slow food movement is now spreading to the Indian market and as it accelerates, the onus is on the entire hospitality industry to promote local, organic, and sustainable food, with youth leading the way. It is necessary to preserve the centuries-old experiences and traditions of previous generations; otherwise we will lose the choices, tastes, landscape diversity, and wildlife associated with traditional farming. Organizations and individuals work with rural youth to revitalize local food systems and help small producers achieve tangible results to support and sustain local jobs in these economies. 

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