

FOREWORD

Food is very personal. We know that. What we often don't realise is that food is also more than personal.

Food is also about culture and, most importantly, about biodiversity. We often do not think how flora and fauna around us make up our culture. We do not think that food diversity, indeed cultural diversity, is linked to diversity in the biological world.

As a result, we often do not value this biodiversity that grows in the wild, in the farm, in the forest and the lake and the ocean. Each region of India, indeed the world, is diverse in its food habits. It has its own recipes; it cooks with different ingredients; it eats differently. This is not an accident.

Every region, for instance, has its own rice variety. Many of these come with medicinal properties. Most are specific to the ecosystem they grow in. If the region is drought-prone, the variety survives in tough conditions, like *Kayame* rice of Karnataka. The *Orkaima*, *Pokkali* and *Kuttadan* varieties found in low-lying districts of Kerala are salt-resistant, hence suitable to grow in seawater. In the highlands of the same state, another rice variety is grown: *Navara* (in Palakkad), which has medicinal properties and has received the Geographical Indication Certificate in 2007.

This richness of variety resulted in culinary methods that were equally diverse and equally rich. Bengal has a tradition of cooking different rice in different seasons. This is our food culture.

If biodiversity disappears we will lose the food wealth on our plates. Food will become impersonal. It will become a sterile package designed for universal size and taste.

We have to join the dots. Food biodiversity needs our care and attention. Today with monocultures taking over, the only biodiversity that will remain will be stored inside the cold and controlled environments of gene pool laboratories. It will not flourish in the living world around us. The world that gives us life and the joy of living.

Just consider *makhana*, the seed of a member of the water-lily family. The plant grows in the multitude of lakes and ponds that once made up the floodplains of north

India. These water bodies were crucial for survival in this region destroyed periodically by rivers that bring water, silt and sorrow. The ecosystem was built by channelling the water of swollen rivers into ponds. This took away the pain of the flood. It provided for storage of water and, in turn, recharged groundwater, giving economic life to agriculture. But most importantly, the wetland gave alternative sources of food. One of which is the protein-rich *makhana*. Once the ponds are gone, the plant will not survive. Our source of food will be lost. One more taste will be forgotten.

One may argue that biodiversity does not need the ecosystem. It can be cultivated and can still be available to us. That is indeed possible. After all, potato originated in far away lands of South America. It was brought to India not so long ago by the Portuguese rulers and is now an essential part of our cuisine. We cannot imagine food without potato.

Yet we miss the biodiversity of potato that gives South American food its richness and indeed its health. We cannot imitate nature. We cannot manufacture biodiversity.

But we can choose to live with it. We can value it in the wild and in the farm. We can savour its taste and smell. This is joy of living. This is what we must not lose. Ever.

It is for this reason that the Centre for Science and Environment and *Down To Earth* decided to put together a compendium of recipes that originate in different regions and plants. It is an attempt to celebrate the knowledge of plant and their properties; how to best cook them to bring out their flavours and smells. This is lived biodiversity.

The emphasis is on appreciating the science and art of nature. If we can make nature part of our lives again; make the connection between what we eat and why we eat it, then we can also safeguard this resource for tomorrow. But if we lose the knowledge and culture of our local cuisines then we lose more than their taste and smell. We lose nature.

We hope you will share our passion for food that brings back this connection—between our stomach, our kitchen, our life and the world around us. We hope you will cook these recipes and enjoy their taste. We hope you will join us in learning more about ways to build biodiversity in our world.

Sunita Narain