

Political Economy of Food & Options for Social Response and action in India- 2013



Ragunathan Chakravarthy

Part I of the series on the Geopolitics and Political Economy of Food in the modern era. Part I focus is on Food production, manufacture, formulation, branding and marketing of food, and sets the larger global geo-political scenario on Food. Paper also Outlines avenues for social action and response in India

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Political Economy of Food
&
Options for Social Response and Action in India

- A Concept Paper

Part I - Food production, formulation, Processing, Branding

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Abstract:

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"The problem with nutrient-by-nutrient nutrition science," points out Marion Nestle, the New York University nutritionist, "is that it takes the nutrient out of the context of food, the food out of the context of diet and the diet out of the context of lifestyle."

Background:

Food has been a potent tool of control, domination and subordination, since the advent of civilization. Food has been denied to populations and civil society to win wars, dominate rival tribal groups, and triumph over feudal opponents. Mighty empires have rested on the ability to produce, stock, store, supply food to its army and population. All this well documented history.

So what is new about food politics today? Since the dawn of industrial society, and emergence of global food multi nationals, the discourse on Food manufacture, preservation, supply, content and nutrition has undergone drastic changes globally. While traditional societies and religious scriptures have largely defined "Food as Almighty", "Food as life-giver", the modern Food corporations have converted Food as an universal tool for enslaving global commons and citizens. Perpetrators of the food crisis such as The World Bank, the World Trade Organization, the World Food Program, the Millennium Challenge, The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and industrial giants like Yara Fertilizer, Cargill, Archer Daniels Midland, Syngenta, DuPont, and Monsanto, are involving in public relations exercise to beam the new avatar as the saviors of the world poor and waging relentless war against global hunger, through their half baked and ill conceived interventions in the manufacture, formulation, branding, packaging, labeling and delivery of food to the table.

The obviously visible side-effect of this global food system is the much publicized melamine contamination of baby foods in China, by Australian company, BSE contaminated meat in Europe, now the Horse and Donkey meat scandal all across Europe in 2013, and some "minor" WHO acknowledged food-epidemics such as SARS, H1N1, Swine-flu, Chickengunya. Irrespective of the classification into minor scandal, small mistakes, the impact of this is on millions of citizens across the global continents.

Food Production Monopoly & Food Crisis:

Today three companies, Archer Daniels Midland (ADM), Cargill, and Bunge control 90% of the world's grain trade. Chemical giant Monsanto controls one fifth of seed production, while Bayer Crop Science, Syngenta, and BASF control half of the total agro-chemical market. Given the rise of monopoly power in the food system, it should come as no surprise that when the world food crisis exploded in 2008, ADM's profits increased by 38%, Cargill's profits by 128%, and Mosaic Fertilizer (a Cargill subsidiary) by a whopping 1,615%!

Apart from other geopolitical goals, food aid functions as a sponge to absorb commodities surpluses in the North and dispose of it at prices below the cost of production in the South. Food aid is monopolized by four companies that control 84% of the transport and delivery. Further, 50-90% of global food aid is conditioned on bilateral trade agreements. USAID, for example, forces recipient countries to accept genetically modified grains. In 2007, 99.3% of U.S. food aid was "in-kind," that is, food procured in the United States and shipped to recipient countries. The global South had yearly trade surpluses in agricultural goods of \$1 billion 40 years ago. By 2001, after three "Development Decades" and the expansion of the industrial agri-foods complex, southern countries were importing \$11 billion/year in food. Immediately following de-colonization in the 1960s, Africa exported 1.3 billion a year worth of food. Today African countries must import 25% of their food. The rise of food deficits in the global South mirrors the rise of food surpluses and market expansion of the industrial North.

According to data compiled by the University of Missouri-Columbia in 2012, in the agriculture and food sector, the four largest companies controlled 82 percent of the beef packing industry, 85 percent of soybean processing, 63 percent of pork packing, and 53 percent of broiler chicken processing. Consolidation is not isolated to farms and processing. In 1998, the four biggest food retailers sold about one-fifth (22 percent) of groceries.

Rise of International Food Monopoly & Growth of Global Hunger:

If one subscribes to the age-old, much repeated mantra for solving food crisis, by giving free hand to the global monopolies, and pursue consolidation, as the supply side gets abundant theoretically this would address the world hunger and eradicate global poverty. Unfortunately the following facts prove the opposite.

The food crisis is affecting over three billion people—half the world's population. The trigger for the present crisis was food price inflation. The World Bank reported that global food prices rose 83% over the last three years and the FAO cited a 45% increase in their world food price index over just nine months. The Economist's food price index stands at its highest point since it was originally formulated in 1845. As of March 2008, average world wheat prices were 130% above their level a year earlier, soy prices were 87% higher, rice had climbed 74%, and maize was up 31%. While grain prices have come down slightly, food prices are still high, and because low-income and poor families are faced with higher fuel and housing costs, they are still unable to buy sufficient food. The crisis of food price inflation is simply the most recent tip of a slow-moving iceberg.

While food rebellions across the globe have only recently made headlines, governments have been promising to end hunger for over 30 years:

- **1974—500 million hungry people in the developing world.** The World Food Conference pledges to eradicate child hunger in 10 years.
- **1996—830 million hungry people.** The World Food Summit pledges to reduce the number of hungry people by half by 2015.
- **1996—12% of the U.S. population is hungry.** U.S. Farm Bill increases food nutrition programs (Food Stamps, Women and Children in need,) and food banks augment donations of government surplus with local and industry donated food.
- **2000 Millennium Summit—**World leaders pledge to reduce extreme poverty and hunger by half by 2015.
- **2002—850 million hungry people.** The World Food Summit+5 admits to poor progress on the Millennium Development goals.
- **2008—862 million hungry people.** The FAO High-Level Conference on World Food Security announces that instead of reducing the ranks of the hungry to 400 million, hunger has increased. The World Bank re-calculates its projections for extreme poverty upward from one billion to 1.4 billion. Over three billion people live on less than \$2 a day.
- **2008—12% of the U.S. population is still hungry.** Despite \$60 billion yearly in government food nutrition programs and the explosion of over 50,000 food banks and food pantries across the nation, one in six children in the United States go hungry each month and 35 million people cannot ensure minimum daily caloric requirements.

The food crisis appeared to explode overnight, reinforcing fears that there are just too many people in the world. But according to the FAO, there were record grain harvests in 2007. There is more than enough food in the world to feed everyone. In fact, over the last 20 years, **world food production has risen steadily at over 2% a year, while the rate of global population growth has dropped to 1.14% a year. Population is not outstripping food supply.** People are too poor to buy the food that is available. "We're seeing more people hungry and at greater numbers than before," said World Hunger Program's executive director Josette Sheeran. **"There is food on the shelves but people are priced out of the market."**

Social Marketing Agencies for Food Monopolies:

The global consolidation of food production, marketing, retailing is socially marketed with philanthropic umbrella slogan coined by UN Agenda 21- Sustainable development. This UN Agenda 21 is sponsored by none other than petrochemical-seed- fertilizer-pharmaceutical monopolies such as the Standard Oil, Monsanto, Dupont, Rockefeller foundation among others. US Dept of Agriculture holds patent, co-owned by Monsanto- sterile next generation seeds. The overall policies are driven by the UN World Food Program (UN-WFP), world government- funded by USAID. There are host of other global organizations leading the Food monopoly agenda such as the The World Bank, the World Trade Organization, the World Food Program, the Millennium Challenge, The Alliance for a Green Revolution in Africa, the U.S. Department of Agriculture. These trade, and "Aid" campaigns are supported by Food-seed-fertilizer giants such as Yara Fertilizer, Cargill, Archer Daniels Midland, Syngenta, DuPont, and Monsanto.

Indian Situation:

The bogey of over-population was raised in the decades of 1950's and 1960's international monopolies along with the support of US department of Agriculture, USAID and several other global multi-lateral agencies, and this led to obtaining US Food Aid, starting with PL 480 wheat hybrid varieties, and subsequent implementation of green revolution. In the post 1990 liberalization scenario, a whole lot of new and aggressive interventions have taken place in Indian agriculture, primarily comprising the following milestones:

- The Global Food MNC's control the think tanks in agricultural universities
- Control of seeds, and introduction of Genetically Modified Cotton, and Brinjal
- Unofficial and undocumented field trials of GM crops across various states in India
- Mechanization of agriculture coupled with hefty subsidy to imported machinery such as rice planters, harvesters
- Corporatization of farming by siphoning of Government land to Indian food and retail corporations under the name of industrial development, Special Economic Zones (SEZ)
- Since the 1990, crop production, farming patterns in India is closely tied into the global capital market, Future & Options and food speculation
- Enactment of legislations to facilitate free play of global trans-national corporations in the production, control, distribution of Seeds, GM Crops, fertilizers, pesticides all the in name of Food Safety, Food Security, and Bio-Technology Regulatory Act of India (BRAI)
- Declining crop yields, water toxification, and drought, desertification, and migration of population from the Green Revolution belt.

As per the statistics released by the Finance Ministry in 2013, Indian agriculture's growth rate has only marginally increased by 1.2% annually compared to the figures of 2.5% and 2.4% in the 9th & 10th Five year plans. The budget speech in 2013 admitted that "original green revolution states face the problem of stagnating yields and over-exploitation of water resources". This looks like an understatement, the remedy for this is to move to new killing green fields such as Eastern Indian states such as Bihar, Jharkhand, Bengal, and no wonder massive dam projects, displacing millions are undertaken in these areas with full force. The government also wants to initiate steps to facilitate "Nutri-farms" (a pseudonym for Genetically Modified Crops) to produce iron-rich bajra, protein-rich maize, and zinc-rich rice. We do not worry about globally failed GM experiments such as Golden Rice (boost Vitamin A)!

These Nutri-farms are supposed to address the mal-nutrition problem of the Indian population. An Indian Institute of Agricultural Bio-technology shall also be established. However, we do not have any further elaboration on the global agencies involved in starting this premier institute.

The Global Food Formula:

The MNC food monopolies essentially cover both end of the pyramid and value chain, the "bottom of the pyramid" is sold the GM food for solving world poverty, and the "top of the pyramid" is sold the "innovative and healthy", "high-protein" food, ensuring the whole global population across classes come under the control of these massive global corporations.

Just 5-7 crops are grown globally, and controlled by these corporations to market all their innovative food products. Corn, Soya, Sugar, Animal fat these are basic ingredients that make up almost 95% of all the packaged food available in the super markets.

The government and international agencies and their farm and retail policies are meant to encourage the production, distribution of just these 4 or 5 basic food crops globally. Today, a mere four crops account for two-thirds of the calories humans eat. When you consider that humankind has historically consumed some 80,000 edible species, and that 3,000 of these have been in widespread use, this represents a radical simplification of the food web.

Food Branding & Marketing-Weapons of Mass Disability:

From Food as medicine to Medicine as Food

More and more the Food products resemble over the counter drugs and medicines.

Food has been manufactured, advertised, packaged, labeled, and sold as a technological product, with a large array of scientific technocrats occupying the center of the dinner table. Global food corporations and their pseudo-scientific technocrats describe food and sell food with plethora of high-sounding scientific terms such as "high-fibre", "low-glucose", "protein-rich", "vitamin fortified", "probiotic", "embellished with digestive enzymes", "energy-efficient", "rejuvenating", "low-carbohydrate", "multi-vitamin", "low-cholesterol". Just a cursory review of these terms, reveals the mystification, and obfuscation of the food, and the inability of the common man to wade through these terms in fine print labeling to decide what and how much to eat.

Everyday hundreds of "new-science" papers emerge to describe mal-nutrition, and "proven" ways to combat them. We are also continuously bombarded with information on new-age epidemics such as Diabetes, Prostate cancer, Obesity, Blood pressure, Cardio-vascular disease, Kidney stones, Parkinson's, Alzheimer's, dementia, Attention deficit disorder, autism, "restless leg syndrome", osteo-arthritis. This digital and media bombardment with "scientific facts" is well aligned to government policies across the globe. Global Food Companies, food processors, Marketers, and Retailers have the right "medicine" and formulations for each of these human diseases.

Novel products of food science often come in packages with health claims. Food is now described as rich in polyunsaturated, healthy cholesterol, monounsaturated, carbohydrate, fiber, containing polyphenols, amino acids and carotenes. Micheal Pollan describes this as the "The Age of Nutritionism"

The actual cost of this lop-sided and ill-advised food strategy is estimated at more than \$200 billion a year in diet-related health-care costs.

Nutritionist Food Claims Unmasked: The Truth of new science

Here are a few examples of the common fictitious claims of food processing, marketing companies. These have been given a free hand post liberalization in 1990 in India, and the last nail in the coffin is the FDI in retail, which is more about quantum of capital permitted, and does not concern the content, claims of the international food marketing, branding, packaging, and processing companies.

A walk down the aisle of any supermarket in Indian metropolitan cities (increasingly in tier 2 and tier 3 cities in India) one can look at the social behavior of consumers resembling the hunter-gatherers, trying to figure out the Food from the packets, struggling hard to overcome obesity, diabetes and host of other ailments. Unfortunately India remains to the capital for many human diseases from diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and disability. May be this is the "demographic-dividend", largely beneficial to the food-fertilizer-seed-pharmaceutical monopolies.

The Catch phrases of Food Industry:

- **Natural** –pesticide, GM ingredients, high fructose processed corn syrup
- **Healthy**- sugar, artificial ingredients, preservatives
- **Calorie counts**, trans fat free- 20% margin error allowed, partially hydrogenated oil
- **Whole grain** –refined flour main ingredient
- **Made with real fruit** – sugar concentrate, red dye, ("Mango and apples without seasons")
- **Diet**- Whatever Coke, Juice, Bread, Cake, Dessert, Ice cream – contains artificial sweeteners

It is impossible to find any product in the retail market without the following ingredients, printed in the smallest possible fonts, and totally unintelligible to the consumers. Here is a simple list of approved additives, preservatives, flavors, colors in India and their actual contents: [The recipe of health foods revealed](#)

- 1) **Artificial colors** – contains coal tar derivatives – **contributes to asthma, allergy, hypertension, headaches, skin rashes**
- 2) **Artificial flavor** – **Possible effects- eczema, affects thyroid, rna, digestive enzymes**
- 3) **Artificial Sweeteners**-(Acesulfame-K, As-partame,Equal ,NutraSweet ,Sac-charin,Sweet'n Low ,Sucralose,Splenda® &Sorbitol)

Highly processed, chemically derived, zero-calorie, sweeteners found in diet foods and diet products to Reduce calories -**Negatively impacts metabolism. Some have been linked to cancer, headaches, dizziness and hallucinations**

- 4) **Benzoate preservatives** – Compounds that preserve fats and prevent them from becoming rancid -**Can cause angiodema, asthma, rhinitis, dermatitis, tumors and urticaria and affect estrogen balance and levels**
- 5) **Brominated Vegetable Oils** – citric juice flavor booster

Increases triglycerides and cholesterol, can damage liver, testicles, thyroid, heart and kidneys

- 6) **High Fructose Corn-(HFCS)** Cheap alternative to cane and beet sugar Sustains freshness in baked goods Blends easily in beverages to maintain sweetness

May predispose the body to turn fructose into fat Increases risk for type-2 diabetes, coronary heart disease, stroke and cancer Isn't easily metabolized by the liver

- 7) **MSG** -(Monosodium Glutamate) Flavor enhancer in restaurant food, salad dressing, chips, frozen entrees soups and more

May stimulate appetite (Are you feeling hungry? Why?- "Hungry Kya?" "Kyon?") and cause headaches, nausea, weakness, wheezing, edema, change in heart rate, burning sensations and difficulty in breathing

- 8) **Olestra**-An indigestible fat substitute used primarily in foods that are fried and baked -**Inhibits absorption of some nutrients Linked to gastrointestinal disease, diarrhea, gas, cramps, bleeding and incontinence**
- 9) **Shortening, Hydrogenated and Partially Hydrogenated Oils** -(Palm, Soybean and others) Industrially created fats used in more than 40,000 food products. Cheaper than natural and vegetable oils. -**Contain high levels of trans-fats, which raise bad cholesterol and lower good cholesterol, contributing to risk of heart disease**
- 10) **Sodium Nitrite and Nitrate** Preserves, colors and flavors cured meats and fish

These are the contents of the most popular products sold in India from Energy drinks, Fruit drinks, Chips, snacks, cakes, rice flour, wheat flour, edible oils, sugar, and savories. The irony is much of this is unregulated, and there are no effective checks and balances in the system, though legislations exist, that permit the addition of all the above common ingredients.

The Market Spend: Food products and trends

Emerging Markets – “Demographic dividend”

The aggressive market spends from major corporations reveal their designs and the hard-sell they need to resort to in order to shove these unhealthy food on peoples' throats.

- Globally, measured media spending on food is the third largest category after automotive and personal care. USD11.9 billion was spent on food advertising in 2008.⁸ This is true for emerging economies such as India, China , Latin America, Central and Eastern Europe
- In the US, in 2006, 44 of the largest food and beverage marketers spent USD1.6 billion marketing their products to children and adolescents. Of this, marketers spent USD745 million, or 46% of the 2006 total, on TV advertising.
- According to a 2010 forecast, global advertising spend online will reach USD96.8 billion by 2014, up from USD55.2 billion in 2009. Online advertising spend will make up 17% of total global advertising spending.
- Companies are directing more of their global advertising budgets towards emerging and developing countries; the share of global marketing spending increased in Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Middle East between 2007 and 2008.

As we have seen what goes into the food, how the food is formulated, manufactured, packaged, branded and sold, it might be worth considering the emergence of childhood diseases and global health crisis based on the consumption of the above foods.

Emerging Disaster: Correlation between Food Monopoly and Child Health

- The International Obesity Taskforce (IOTF) estimates that globally up to 200 million school-aged children are either overweight or obese and, of those, 40-50 million are classified as obese.⁷
- Worldwide in 2010, it is estimated that 43 million children under the age of five were overweight and obese. Of those, 35 million lived in developing Countries.
- The worldwide prevalence of overweight and obesity in pre-school children is expected to rise from 6.7% in 2010, and reach 9.1% or close to 60 million children under five in 2020.

- The estimated prevalence of childhood overweight and obesity in Africa in 2010 was 8.5%, and is expected to reach 12.7% in 2020.
- The prevalence is lower in Asia (4.9% in 2010) than in Africa (8.5% in 2010), but the number of affected children (18 million) is higher in Asia.

Social Action & Responses in India:

There have been several responses to the food situation, food related health issues across the Indian states by several organizations. These social responses have started gaining momentum since 2004-2005 the following are the prominent responses so far:

- ❖ Farmers' Agitation against Genetically Engineered (Modified) crop introduction
- ❖ Seed conservation, and promoting crop diversity
- ❖ Awareness campaigns on ill effects of use of Pesticides, Herbicides
- ❖ Organic farms and agricultural, zero-budget agriculture
- ❖ Urban consumer movements for Safe food
- ❖ Awareness creation on Pesticide and fertilizer residue in vegetables and food grains
- ❖ Promotion of rain-fed agriculture and millets as opposed to Green revolution sponsored irrigation intensive Big Five Crops (Rice, Wheat, Sugarcane, Cotton, Maize)
- ❖ Direct marketing from agricultural farmers to urban consumers
- ❖ Formation of Pan-India organizations such as the Organic association
- ❖ Networking with globally active organizations such as the Pesticide Action Network
- ❖ Small initiatives on urban farming, kitchen gardens, waste-to-vegetable by composting

Need for Coordinated action & Comprehensive All-India Response:

While it is heartening to see various initiatives and social actions across India, the sad aspect is that these actions and movements are sporadic, uncoordinated, and are not cross linked and networked. Most organizations work in Silos, owing to their allegiance to their own brand of NGO activity and fund allocation structures.

There has been no significant movement and awareness about the false claims, branding, advertisement by the big corporate, and food retailers in India. We also find that there is not much action on the scientific and academic front to counter the false science propagated by the Nutrition scientists largely funded by Food MNC's and actively encouraged by Government institutions. In addition to the global food issues highlighted in this paper, there is much larger problem, specific to India that of adulteration of food products, since a very long time. Large Indian retailers and Food Companies constantly mis-label, mis-represent basic facts such as date of manufacture, place of manufacture, date of packaging, origin of food etc.

The Big Food corporations in India have jumped into the organic produce bandwagon, and do not deem fit to even mention the origin of their rice, wheat, cereals in their elaborate labels. The key information we can obtain from the food labels in India is in which SEZ (Special Economic Zone) Industrial facility the food product has been packaged, it is worthwhile to remember that SEZ are on a long.....tax holiday from the government. So a simple packet of rice might be originating from Uttar Pradesh, and might be packed in a place like Puduchery, Tamilnadu to avail the tax exemption benefit from the Government.

The global food MNC constantly urging Indians to “Savor the Sweet and Celebrate” through digital advertisements in hundred plus TV channels daily has continued to evade taxes to the tune of several hundred crores rupees, while not having a manufacturing unit in Himachal Pradesh, SEZ, thereby misrepresenting the facts on the label about the production unit.(actually non-existing). This shows the ethics and legal compliance by multi-nationals in India, if this is what they do, one can only imagine what they actually put into the beautifully crafted chocolate wrappers.

Though the government is apparently eager to promote consumer awareness through its digital media campaigns, there are not enough food inspectors, and staff to monitor this. There is simply no system for implementation and monitoring food quality, food labeling, advertisement, branding, and sales. Implementation and enforcement is lacking in spite of a number of legislations having been passed since last 8 years. The existing legislations such as Food Safety and Standards (FSS) Act, 2006, Rules & Regulations, Food Adulteration Act 2004, Food Security bill, Bio-technology Regulatory authority of India, **are just that -legislations without adequate staffing and enforcement.**

The need of the hour in India is develop a networked response to Food in India across the following spectrum:

- Academic – Engage with mainstream, food MNC’s funded Nutrition scientists and academically refute their claims scientifically
- Advertisement & Media – Protest false claims, of food products, and their contents by major food marketing companies, and campaign against airing such advertisements
- Consumers : Create awareness and build social responses to boycott brands and products containing hazardous chemicals, preservatives, emulsifiers, additives, highlight the health impact from such products
- Farmers- Build cooperatives to market direct to urban consumers, campaign against introduction of GM Crops, promote crop diversification, encourage dry-land and millet farming
- Legislative Action: Challenge the Food Security, BRAI Bill, Fight for implementation of Food Safety and Standards, campaign for Legislation to ban hazardous chemicals, additives, emulsifiers, preservatives from food products
- Legal: Campaign for PIL on false claims, bogus branding by food companies

Though the above list looks daunting, one must remember that when Food is wielded as a weapon against an ignorant and ill-informed population, it calls for the most comprehensive response, across classes, castes, communities, professions, a broad united front of the people. This is all the more urgent, as we have seen Food is manufactured and managed through massive global corporations whose annual turnover exceeds the GDP of more than 80 odd countries in the world. As the tentacles of the global food corporations encompass the farm-to-fork spectrum, so we must have a broad alliance that covers the social victims of this spectrum: **farmers, consumers, senior citizens, men, women, lawyers, students, politicians, journalists, media persons, traders, police, prisoners, priests, engineers, architects, businessmen, sportsperson, children- just about everybody who need good and healthy Food everyday to survive without disability, deadly diseases and food allergies!**

Such is the magnitude of the problem, hence the need for **coordinated, cross-networked local and global alliance** to **fight for a simple, basic Fundamental Right to good, simple and nutritious food devoid of chemicals that cause mass disability and destruction.**