

## ON THE SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF AGRICULTURE AND FOOD

One of the biggest aspects of human life that link our social and ecological spheres is food. The changes in our agriculture, our diet and our social structures are intricately linked and co-dependent. As human beings develop ways and techniques to progress materially and spiritually, their food and its quality remains the foundation for all growth, the source of energy for the physical body, the primary human instrument. Food with high consciousness can aid the ascent of consciousness in human beings and of course, this will in turn aid growing more food with higher consciousness. Our connection with food goes beyond our instincts to feed our physical selves. It makes us a part of the larger whole and weaves us into the complex natural ecosystem.

If we look back at the evolution of how humans have obtained their food, we see an obvious evolution of what food was being eaten and the subtle social evolution in the background of the rise of human civilisations.

The need of a social unit within the species is common to all life. Aggregations, division of roles, collective intelligence, are natural phenomenon not unique to humans. Animals, Birds, fishes, insects, bees, microbes, even plants grow in communities with each element in its natural niche working within and for the collective. But the gift of consciousness of self allows every human to carry a world within himself and empowers each individual of the collective. But we have taken a long time and are still stumbling in learning how to balance life as an individual and as a selfless servitor of the commons.

As hunters and gatherers in the wild, life was simple but by no stretch easy, and organization around family units helped division of work of hunting, caring for the young, helping with water, fire, protection against animals and so forth. During this period, man learnt to domesticate fire- probably the biggest technological leap for mankind, developed language, art and possibly more ways than we are aware of for the expression of self. Not so long ago, about 10,000 years or so, man began the great adventure of farming. Agriculture solidified the social concepts by grounding the family units to one place, thus giving rise to ideas of ownership. Working on land to grow what you want rather than taking what is available means more work and requires more hands. Thus families grew bigger and children found work immediately on the fields. A sedentary life and growing population makes social systems more complex and thus people within families found their role outside and within the house to sustain the family organism. Farming, animal care, cooking, cleaning, teaching, curing, giving and receiving, all could be done within one large family, or within a community. Humanity thus evolved for thousands of years learning how to organize, or rather how to

maintain a good organization of the social organism. Agriculture, the word itself means a culture of the land, a culture that evolved on the foundations of how humans worked with and on the land.

The need for balancing individualism and collectivism and at times giving importance to one over the other can be seen in how religions evolved into social dogmas suppressing the individual for the collective for hundreds of years leading us finally to the recent centuries where individualism and collectivism were concluded to be mutually exclusive and we set sail into the new world with the assumption that individual wellbeing alone will eventually lead to social wellbeing.

We have thus arrived at a point where none of the approaches can be said to have served us or our ecosystems. We are back to the question of how to realize the highest human potential as an individual and as a collective. And food and agriculture will be a big part of this puzzle and will be directly impacted by the course we decide to travel.

The trend of people moving from agriculture to an urban culture is on a rise in India and across the world. The degradation of the rural life and ecosystems has forced people to migrate to already densely populated cities with a hope for a better life. The move from a village to a city is not only a physical one, but also a psychological leap from collective to individual identity.

This reality alongwith the fact that families are not as big as they used to be once, that a large family too breaks up into smaller nuclei has meant lesser hands on the agricultural field. Mechanisation has thus helped in this regard but impacts of mechanization are far reaching and require a deeper reflection. At the same time migrants in cities find themselves out of job and relegated to a life in slums adding to the pressures of an already struggling urban system. Parallel to this, people tired of a degenerative city life are moving to rural areas in search of a simple life and with an aspiration of connecting with nature. Thus we see a flow of people in both directions but with very different skills, temperaments and aspirations.

The future of agriculture stands between the traditional farmers, some of whom are tired of the ecological (climate change, wildlife, consequences of green revolution) and social (cultural and economic) pressures while only some have the resources to experiment with a different way, and the new educated aspirant with tools like Permaculture and natural farming methods trying to find yet again a balance of individual growth and collective prosperity, caught in a tight balancing act, without much guidance.

The agriculture of the future cannot dismiss the social without with there will be no culture. This future of agriculture demands not only a new way of farming, but a new way of social organization, of people coming together spontaneously or by design forming families and

communities that don't exist anymore to support each other and to help dream and realize this task which is beyond an individual. This coming together of people for a purpose and not social obligation would require a new ethical framework beyond religion and dogma. The first condition of collaboration in farming will lead to the empowerment of the future of the farm and the farmer without which no method of sustainable farming can work.

The second important task for the future farmers will be to think of succession. A farm as an enterprise has been sustainable because children of farmers have continued farming after their parents and have passed on the skill and the responsibility to their children. With more and more opportunities for learning and expressing one self, it would be morally wrong and socially regressive to expect farmers' children, irrespective of the economic state of the farm, to take up the work of their parents. For intentional communities of today, the option of new people joining the community in future would be a solution but there must be a space for this and an integration plan that can take care of the social challenges this would present.

The situation may be more challenging for individuals, couples and families who have moved to the land for a simple life. The collective effort in this back to the land and back to the nature movement must go on without people having to reinvent themselves again and again which presents its own limitations and costs excessive resources. A vision for succession and visualization of systems that can outlast human lives could be the key for supporting sustainable changes at various scales of human organization.

In this future where we grow food together to nourish our individual and collective souls, where individual and collective growth will serve each other to create a holistic invisible foundation, wisdom of working with the forces of nature and technology to enhance natural potential and accelerate evolution, will help us realize abundance and prosperity within the limits of the sacred. Such a farm will be regenerative, to say the least, not only from the point of view of the economy, but also ecology, society and the spirit.

Food has been central to the human communities and intertwined with growth of cultures and civilisations and the current deterioration in our cultural and social lives comes hand in hand with our degrading connection with our food. Thus, coming closer to our food, learning how it is grown, where it comes from and possibly growing some or all of it ourselves is a step in the direction of learning again what we are losing quickly, the essence of being a truly natural being.

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