

Sattvik 2004: Traditional Food Festival at IIMA

Subject : Green Food

Details :

Various institutions that are a part of the Honey Bee Network (NIF, SRISTI, GIAN and IIMA) came together to organize the Traditional Food Festival at IIMA campus on February 28-29, 2004. The timing was not accidental. February 28 is the Foundation Day of NIF and thus the Festival was also a way of celebrating NIF's commitment to diversity, local knowledge and innovations based on agro-biodiversity. The festival focused on four objectives : (a) to stimulate demand of local crops and their varieties from dry regions so as to generate market based incentives for their conservation, (b) to generate feedback from the visitors about the attributes they prefer in local varieties and also in organic food, (c) to organize competition among women and others to identify recipes based on less common or uncultivated plants and create awareness about organic food in the cities for better consumer health as well as sustainability of soil and water use practices, and (d) to bring various institutions working for the cause of organic agriculture on a common platform.

The advantage of emerging demand for organic food is being harnessed primarily by gentlemen farmers who have switched to organic agriculture in the recent past. Just as rich farmers could derive greater benefit from the green revolution, there is fear that the organic food market may similarly see their dominance.

It is also important to note that several factors have led to a decline in agro-biodiversity in rural areas such as diffusion of modern varieties primarily by public agencies, changes in consumer taste, declining demand from consumers as well as from food and agro processing industry for dry land crops and their varieties, lack of public procurement and price support policy, etc. Honey Bee Network has been documenting peoples' knowledge and innovations about biodiversity as well as other resources. As a part of an on-going research at IIMA and SRISTI, dialogues have been held with the industry, researchers and other stakeholders about incentives for *in situ* conservation. Since many of the local varieties are also grown organically, for lack of choice and options as poor farmers cannot afford inputs, demand for these varieties also reinforces demand for organic products.

Diversity of crops and other food items is closely linked with cultural diversity. One cannot conserve one without the other. The Traditional Food Festival, thus, also became an occasion to celebrate diversity of culture, creativity in cuisine and conservation ethic. A book of traditional food recipes in Gujarati published by SRISTI was also released on the occasion and about 250 copies were sold.

Prof. Bakul Dholakia, Director, IIMA, while inaugurating the Food Festival emphasized the importance of biological and food diversity present in our culture. He regretted that a lot of restaurants took great pride in offering Thai, Mexican or Italian food. But one would not be able to sample recipes from different regions of Gujarat in the same restaurant. He appreciated the efforts made by SRISTI and NIF which were trying to highlight the knowledge and values of informal

technologies and institutions in our villages. He said that contrary to popular perception, IIMA was not indifferent to local knowledge and diversity. In fact, considerable work had been done in this field during the last decade or so. He hoped that more faculty members and students from the Institute would join such efforts and help in conserving cultural, biological and food diversity for future generations.

Organizing the Festival

Several institutions involved in organic farming joined hands with SRISTI to organize the festival. Jatan, was one such institution which was an important part of the endeavour. It had earlier organized food festivals for organic producers in several parts of Gujarat. In all, there were 40 different stalls, primarily of food. Stalls dealing with publications related to sustainable agriculture were also there. Total sales at the festival amounted to Rs.2.8 lakh with maximum sales generated at the farmers' market where organic producers sold their products themselves.

There were many Gandhian organizations which had put up their stalls. These provided a complete range of organic products to the consumers. Farmers from Vadodara had brought organic vegetables which proved to be extremely popular. Kutch organic farmers had brought herbal value added products made of *Aloe vera* and other such dry land plants. V S Hospital had put up a stall to highlight their observation (based on scientific experiments) that considerable health improvement was witnessed in specific disease groups by feeding patients with diet comprising minor millets.

One of the most popular stalls at the Festival was the stall by farmers from Surjumi village of Panchmahal district. It had recipes based on local grains such as sweet *laddu* (Rs.10 per piece of 40 g) made of *Eleusine coracana*. In addition, they sold various dishes made of local varieties of maize, *Setaria italica*, *Paspalum scorbiculatum*, *Cucumis callosus*, *Ficus glomerata*, *Cucurbita pepo*, *Oryza sativa*, *Zea mays*, etc.

About 14,000 people visited the festival during the two days that it was organized and consumed various food items and also bought fabrics dyed with vegetable colours and treated with herbal extracts. A recipe competition was also organized on the occasion and was judged by the executive chef of Hotel Taj Umed, faculty from Institute of Hotel Management and other local food experts. There was also considerable interest among the representatives of major hotels who had visited the food festival to present to their clients special health based food menu cards. If this caught on and became a trend, it could herald a major breakthrough in the area of conserving agro biodiversity. Demand for minor millets and other crops from hotel industry could provide incentives for conservation and production of these health crops. Nutritional information about some of the food items was also displayed but this is an area where much more research needs to be done before the next food festival.

The presence of a large number of children was a welcome sign as it translated into their becoming more aware about the idea of diversity. The media also took considerable interest in the festival and the activities like the recipe competition. Members of the media interacted with the visitors. Many distinguished citizens including eminent Gandhian leaders, scientists, High Court Judges and

entrepreneurs also visited the festival. The festival generated significant appreciation from the IIMA community. Many were eager to know when the next food festival would be organized.

Awareness and demand for organic

The impact of the festival could be gauged from an on the spot survey that revealed the estimated demand for organic grains. The preference for organic food was articulated by 422 visitors who responded to the questionnaire.

Demand for wheat was about 36 tons (251 respondents), rice 16 ton (238), pearl millet (*bajra*) 2 tons (127), edible oil 8.6 ton (176), jaggery 3 ton (170), gram whole 2.7 ton (178), gram pulse (176), *moong bean* 2.4 ton (178), *tur dal* 4 ton (178), black gram 1.6 ton (118) and many other commodities (*Figures in parentheses indicate number of respondents*).

When asked how many would like to read about organic farming, more than 90 per cent showed interest. In terms of promoting organic products, majority were interested in either helping by spreading the information by word of mouth or by purchasing these products. A few were willing to help as representatives or volunteers for various activities and a couple wanted to help by singing or writing songs. More than 50 per cent of the respondents said that such a festival should be organized more often. About 20 per cent of the men and 10 per cent of the women wanted access to information as well as organic products. While evaluating various criteria for purchasing organic products, the quality of produce was given the maximum rank followed by organic certification, reliable source of supply, reasonable price and packaging. Men placed more emphasis on certification. Majority of the respondents had come to know about the festival through media reports. Other sources included friends, hoardings on the road side and staff of SRISTI, IIMA, NIF, GIAN and through the *Loksarvani* newsletter. More than 70 per cent of the respondents were willing to pay 10 to 15 per cent premium, 20 per cent of the male and 11 per cent of the female respondents were willing to pay 16 to 20 per cent premium. About less than 10 per cent of the respondents (of the total 358 respondents) were willing to pay more than 20 percent premium.

Another survey had been carried out by two students — Sudipta and Vijaya of Postgraduate Programme in Agri Business Management for a second year course at IIMA. The survey was conducted essentially to study the organic food market and consumer behaviour. A sample of 40 respondents, of which one third were women, was surveyed. More than 80 per cent had monthly income of more than Rs.15,000 and 30 per cent had a professional degree. About 95 per cent defined organic food as one grown without any chemicals and 80 per cent considered organic food to have been grown with organic fertilizer and pesticides. Hardly six per cent were aware about the procedural requirements for certification. Majority of the respondents were not willing to pay any premium of more than one or two per cent (a finding at variance from the larger sample study done at Food Festival, mentioned above). Many consumers considered the goodwill of the retailer a significantly more important factor than certification. The demand for food and vegetables was much higher than grains and the ease of availability was considered an important factor influencing purchase. Taste, trust and goodwill seemed to be the three differentiating factors.

The Food Festival was quite successful as a means of generating awareness about crops and varieties for which consumption is almost non-existent in urban areas and is going down even in rural areas. But while demand for organic food was quite high, supply was a major constraint. People's Action for Research and Assistance to Innovation and Traditional Knowledge Holders (Parakh) has taken a major initiative in this regard.

One institution alone may not be able to handle all these goals. Certification of organically grown crops and livestock produce — a crucial issue — will require a large network of volunteer inspectors knowledgeable about agriculture to visit farmers. Much of the sourcing of organic food is currently done on goodwill basis. Sadbhav SRISTI Sanshodhan Laboratory will also have to play its role in testing soils and grains/vegetables for pesticide residues. (Honey Bee, 14(4) & 15 (1): 31-33, 2003).