

Why we need family farmers

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Not only will they give you access to clean food, but your patronage will help them practise sustainable agriculture. It's a win-win

A farmer at Spudnik Farms, Bengaluru

It's a beautiful spring morning in Delhi when I meet Babulal Dahiya, a Padma Shri-winning farmer from the Satna district in Madhya Pradesh. He is in the capital at the invitation of the Delhi Organic Farmers Market, a very active organisation of small farmers that sells chemical-free produce at weekly markets throughout the NCR, in collaboration with residents welfare associations, chefs and hotels alike. This group has organised a panel discussion on indigenous rice varieties, and Dahiya and I are panellists. The 30 minutes that I spend with him before our on-stage discussion is enlightening in a way that it has fundamentally altered my [food](#) choices since.

Dahiya, originally a poet, writer and collector of folk tales in the Bagheli dialect, became interested in indigenous crops and plants of his region after he came across references to these in folk literature. Today, he works at reviving and conserving them with many other small scale farmers of his district. In their fields, they grow 200 varieties of indigenous rice according to seasons, 12 types of local wheat, scores of seasonal vegetables and greens — chemical free, even if not certified organic.

"Like you used to have the concept of family doctors, it is the need of the hour for everyone to have a family farmer, too," Dahiya tells me. What he means is that all of us urban dwellers should patronise at least one small farmer from whom we can buy clean food, and who, in turn, is helped by our patronage to practice sustainable [agriculture](#).

A clean plate

This is a wise idea. For years, many of us have been privy to horror stories of pesticides in our food. A recent campaign by the Delhi Organic Farmers Market chillingly claims there are 450 pesticides in our everyday plates on an average.

Friends who have worked with farmers, setting up retail chains bringing produce directly to fashionable farm-to-plate restaurants, point out how chemicals are so overused that farmers these days set aside small patches of land to exclusively grow cleaner food for themselves and their families, refusing to eat what they grow for the market. "Even birds, bees and insects don't come to fields where there is too much pesticide poison," farmers like my friend Sneha Yadav, who owns Tijara [Farms](#) in Rajasthan, have repeatedly told me.

A farmers' Market

Meanwhile, organic is a grey area. Since the green revolution that popularised the use of chemical fertilisers to up production, most of India's agriculture is inorganic. Organic certification for small farmers is hard because the land needs to lie fallow for some years to be clear of chemical residue and also because nothing can be 100% organic if neighbouring fields use chemicals. After all, nature doesn't recognise man-made boundaries, and cross pollination or dispersal of seeds from the neighbourhood happens.

Dahiya, says that by patronising small farmers, we can be assured of clean food because indigenous varieties of crops, fruits and vegetables, native to the soil, do not require the overwhelming chemical intervention that hybrid plants do. They can withstand minor climactic vagaries, and nature has provided enough cures and safeguards against disease and pests to not warrant excessive chemical pesticides. Because these are not high yield varieties, expensive chemical fertilisers are not needed either.

Helping diversity

For farmers, the benefit of a growing demand for indigenous produce is immense, too. India's agrarian crisis and crippling debts are directly related to chemicals. Hybrid seeds and chemical fertilisers are expensive. Their excessive use means that soil fertility is impacted. A *Down to Earth* study says that too many chemical fertilisers have reduced carbon content of the soil from 1% to .3% in the last decade, impacting productivity.

Then, there is the issue of declining plant diversity, something we have been steadily losing. Food history shows how India was agriculturally rich with over two lakh ancient varieties of rice when Greek historian Megasthenes visited. By the time of *Mansoll'sa* (a text on food) in the 12th century, these were considerably less. After the green revolution, plant diversity has been steadily going down. Patronising indigenous food will conserve this diversity.

Price is, of course, an issue. Indigenous crops, seasonal vegetables, et al, are more expensive. By paying a premium for clean food, those of us who can afford it can contribute in our small way. Farmers will be encouraged towards sustainability and, hopefully, a real change may occur

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