

Disappearing handcart

When imported kiwifruit and broccoli top the food charts

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OR the last thirty years I have been buying my groceries from one of two small shops near my house. One was run by a Hindu, another by a Muslim. There was much healthy rivalry to keep down the prices, even while providing good quality rice, dhal, spices and condiments. Shopping used to be a pleasure. We used to discuss the rival attractions of Nellore and Ponni rice, and bargain over prices. On the way to the grocer's I would stop at one handcart to buy vegetables, at another to buy fruits. The owners would make an effort to bring rare berries and herbal plants to feed my growing family.

Then, a few years ago, one corporate supermarket came up nearby, followed by another and another. The Hindu grocer gave up, sold his little shop and retired. The Muslim borrowed money from relatives in the Middle East and stocked his shop with the same fancy goods as the supermarket. He has switched over to the same packed foods as the supermarkets. But, without the air-conditioning, the décor and the other frills provided by the supermarkets, I wonder whether he can survive.

Fruits and vegetables are now sold at the supermarket in plastic packets. Everything is standardised. The boy who does my shopping prefers the air-conditioned comfort of the supermarkets to the hot little grocer's shop.

Shimla apples and Nagpur oranges are no longer available. Imported Kiwi fruit and broccoli are the order of the day. Even bananas are imported. Each individual fruit has a sticker indicating its country of origin – Australia, New Zealand, USA or Thailand – which I

have to peel off, or would end up swallowing. As I had vowed never to buy imported agricultural produce, I stayed away from the imported fruits in search of Indian ones for a long time. Now I too have succumbed.

What is the Government of India doing? India is basically an agricultural country: if we do not buy the produce of our farmers, who will? It is extremely dangerous to import food items that will supplant local varieties. Processed foods are worse – everything is imported, from milk and fruit juices to dates. I am waiting for the day when I will have to buy Australian *appalam* or Italian *vathal*.

It would have been pardonable if there had been a good reason for the imports – that they were grown organically or were farm-fresh and so on. But even that is not regulated. The perfectly shaped fruits are obviously genetically modified with hormones. These are extremely harmful to human health. Most agriculture-exporting nations use high quantities of pesticides: USA uses 775, EU uses 600 and Thailand uses 280, compared with 179 used by India. Indian testing laboratories do not have the chemicals to test the many hormones and pesticides used abroad, so the foods enter unchecked. Currently, the foreign exporter lists the pesticides he has used – generally as zero – and the Indian government accepts the foreign exporter's list unhesitatingly. They are supported by their governments whom we dread to offend, so the pesticide-laden products sail smoothly into our markets.

The recent case of pesticides in

Australian wheat is a good example. A hue and cry was raised by the media. Then the Australian government stepped in and denied the use of pesticides, our government issued a statement supporting the denial, the media kept quiet and the subject disappeared from TV channels and newspapers. If there were no pesticides, who raised the cry, and why? And what did the lab reports that cleared the wheat say? There are no explanations.

There is also the problem of new pests entering the Indian environment with the food produce. The Centre for International Trade in Agriculture and Agro-based Industries (CITA) found 87 new pests in apples imported from the USA. We do not know what else has entered from other countries. Then there is the usual confusion between the Plant Quarantine Organisation and the Ministry of Health, with each putting the responsibility on the other. Obviously, the Government does not want us to know.

The government's purchase price for wheat was considerably lower than that of private buyers who bought out the market and created an artificial scarcity, resulting in food shortages. The Government now imports wheat at a higher price. Agricultural imports went up four times since India signed the WTO in 1995, and four million Indian farmers lost their jobs. India has no laws to halt the unchecked import of foods, consequent to the removal of quantitative restrictions under WTO rules in 2001. Last year, we signed a free-trade agreement with zero duty imports with Thailand, which has inundated



guest column

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the market with oranges and bananas. Our short-sighted agricultural policies are the cause of the thousands of suicide deaths among the farmers of Andhra Pradesh, Maharashtra and elsewhere. The numbers will go up further if we do not give primacy to agriculture.

On the other hand, India agricultural exports are rejected by foreign countries for reasons of toxic contamination. Thus India's exports of fresh fruits and vegetables fell from 1.29 million tonnes in 2003-2004 to 1.24 million tonnes in 2004-2005.

We urgently need laws to control agricultural imports, giving primacy to our own, and better law enforcement. The imports must be tested in modern up-to-date testing laboratories established all over the country.

The provision stores and handcarts have been a part of our culture. Indian produce cannot stand the competition of subsidised agricultural produce from the USA and EU. The Finance Minister's new Saral II form had a column to record expenses. The intention was obvious – to eliminate the self-employed small trader and farmer who cannot provide a bill, thereby forcing us to shop at the supermarkets. When the Indian farmer cannot trust his own government, there is little wonder that he commits suicide. ■