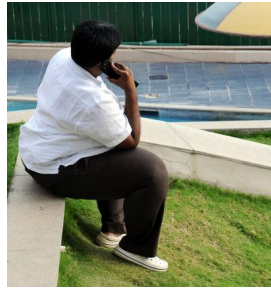# BLink

Fat is not always fine

JOANNA VAN GRUISEN

Fat facts. India is among the top 10 countries where, according to a recent study, more than half of the world's 671 million obese people live, even as it battles widespread malnutrition and food shortage. Photo: K Ramesh Babu

About half of all the produce and labour of the world's farmers is thrown away or squandered. Isn't it incredible that while a billion starve, we waste food enough for three billion?

We went to Europe this summer to visit friends and family, and to spread the word about our sarai to agents there. It was four years since my last visit. On earlier occasions, I would be hit by an uncomfortable culture shock when re-exposed to the naked consumerism of the West — so many items, so many shoppers. That was during the '80s and '90s; unfortunately, over the years Indians have also fallen prey to retailers' shopping-makes-me-happy mantra, so now the contrast is not at all acute.

However, I was shocked by the change in restaurant food portions; these had grown, and were what I would call American-sized. As an occasional visitor, Raghu had previously drawn my attention to the fact that now people in Britain were little different in size than Americans. Earlier, he used to joke, you could always tell which of the two countries you were in by the number of corpulent individuals seen on the streets — in those days, America outweighed the UK. The contrast is not as visible anymore. Of course, a combination of factors has led to this scenario, but most agree that globalisation, the spread of fast-food chains and cheap unhealthy food are major reasons. But I'm sure those large portions have something to do with it. One is enough for two but if, like me, you have been brought up to finish everything on the plate, it is easy to overeat. Alternatively, one leaves half of it uneaten and it gets thrown away — I'll get to the waste issue later.

Meanwhile, in case you feel this is a long way from India, where the popular image is of a large malnourished population, think again. India figures as one of the top 10 countries where, according to a recent study, more than half of the world's 671 million obese people live. The US, China, Russia, Brazil, Mexico, Egypt, Germany, Pakistan and Indonesia are the other nine. Over the last two decades, obesity has become a global problem, and there is now what some describe as a 'globesity epidemic'. No longer a Western phenomenon, obesity has spread to the developing countries. Of course, with India's large population, the percentage of obesity in the

population is relatively lower, nevertheless the high number should be a cause for concern — for the country, not just the individuals. Obesity is a serious and expensive public health problem, and is viewed in some countries as one of the biggest threats in terms of financial cost and societal impact. Another reason not to encourage McDonald's and KFC!

India is also moving towards eating the 'wrong' foods — processed, sugar-high, 'Western' fare — but is also, perhaps, eating more. And the two can go together. A 2008 study suggested that junk food consumption alters brain activity in a manner similar to addictive drugs like cocaine and heroin. After many weeks with unlimited access to junk food, the pleasure centres of rat brains became desensitised, requiring more food for pleasure.

But is there really that much difference between overeating and leaving food on the plate? Both constitute unnecessary waste. And can the world afford this? Afford not in personal economic terms, but in expense to the planet. It is estimated that in developed countries as much as a third to half of all the food produced is thrown away; in developing countries, we lose similar amounts post-harvest. Put another way, this means just about half of all the produce and labour of the world's farmers is thrown away or squandered. Is it not crazy that while a billion starve, we waste food enough to feed three billion? And this does not include the 'wasted' extra calories that those 671 million consume.

But the good news is that we can all quite easily help make a difference. After realising how much of an effect consuming animal products has on personal and environmental health, one researcher says: "It's the number one thing that an average person around the world can do to reduce climate change, affect biodiversity and protect their own health: just eat less animal products and eat more plants."

American scientist Brian Machovina calls his conservation plan 90P as he says we should aim to get a minimum of 90 per cent of our daily calories from plants instead of meat. True, India's meat consumption per capita is relatively low but, even so, it is growing enough for some economists to blame soaring food prices on the increasing demand for meat and dairy products in China and India.

Obesity and diet are both relevant to the issue of global food security. Demand for food could double over the next 50 years: as populations increase, if the current trends continue, we're looking at a 'global famine'. Time to change our habits. For India, it is more a question of returning to, or remaining with, old habits rather than adopting new (but outdated) globalised ones. The West is now learning the advantages and returns (in health and reduced effects on climate change and food shortages) of eating locally grown, seasonal produce. When India already knows this, why deviate from the path? It distresses me to see India espousing misguided Western ways, when in so many fields its self-styled 'backwardness' is now vanguard action.

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