

Narrative Explorations of the Transition to Sustainable Consumption

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Objectives

- Explores the idea of a green consumer in the context of India
- Challenges the notion of environmental issues as the primary impetus for changing consumer behavior
- Deconstructs the notion of individual responsibility and explores intersections between narratives and practices as the driving reason for transforming to greener consumption
- Deconstructs the notion of sustainability using data collected from the emerging middle class in Bangalore

Theory

- Green consumerism is socially constructed – both in the idea of what construes green, as well as how the role of the consumer is shaped.
- Construct of the green consumer has emerged in response to more hedonistic culture of accumulation that underpins the growth narrative – globally & India.
- Pro-environmental concern can be a likely predictor of green buying behavior Ishaswini and Datta (2011)?

Narratives

- Global narratives like In 2012, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) launched the Think. Eat. Save
- Global narratives framed around consuming specific kinds of products
- Sustainability underscored as key ideal and motivator
- Organic food is a signal of changing consumer behavior, where they move to eating food that is free from pesticides and chemicals and are generally embedded in more sustainable supply chains
- Personal responsibility and choices emphasized rather than practices

Methodology

- Qualitative data gathered between August 2013 and September 2014: **100 short and 27 in-depth interviews, IT sector employees**
- Among the “middle classes”: income range, but also education, place of residence, etc.
- Observations in the home, workplace, and other spaces of food consumption, such as supermarkets and restaurants, etc.
- Interview were transcribed and coded using Nvivo software.

Current Projections for Middle class

- The middle class represents only 13.1 % of India's population and currently owns:
 - 49 % of total number of cars in India,
 - 21 % of television sets
 - 53 % of computers,
 - 53% of air conditioners
 - 38 % of microwaves
 - 46 % of credit cards.

(NCAER 2011)
- By 2015-16, India would have 53.3 million middle class households, translating into 267 million people falling in the category (NCAER, 2011).
- By 2025-26 that number is likely to more than double from the 2015-16 levels to 113.8 million households or 547 million individuals.

Understanding sustainability

- Individual health and environment attitudes are believed to be the key determinants of sustainable food practice.
- Attitudes to organic food key determinant (Chen 2009; Wandel and Bugge, 1997)
- However it emerged that understandings of sustainability very different in diverse cultural contexts
- Linked to nostalgia...Food that once was...

Over time....in their times, food was much more better....the way the vegetables or crops were cultivated were more better .. organic is nothing but the way it is grown, it is devoid of all these chemical things...it is grown in a very special suitable environment where it's away from the city

Understanding Sustainability

- ❑ Food that is not commercialized but available at only certain times/seasons
- ❑ Seasonal was also conflated to local rather than imported
- ❑ Food that was fresh and freshly cooked – visual/tactile dimension
- ❑ Sustainability as an abstraction with no clear link to food practice
- ❑ Practices themselves valued for being sustainable rather than the produce
- ❑ In 127 coded interviews: Environment values as a motivator mentioned by 10 of our respondents. Sustainability – 3 & the environment – 7
- ❑ Health directly linked to food practice- 56

Role of Health

- Health in general mentioned 281 times
- Awareness about the link to food and health present but point of transformation not linear
- Not proactive about actually changing practice
- Health problems were a “trigger” in changing consumption
- Problems were not necessarily critical or lifestyle related but acted as triggers
- Interventions were diverse – Ayurvedic practice/diets/doctors
- Interventions not necessarily about food but also practice – timings of food/ways of cooking

Organic Food

- Changing food practice not directly linked to adopting organic food
- “organic” around food practices was deployed 609 times and explicitly discussed by 49 out of the 120 respondents
- No clear understanding of where to procure organic food (assumptions about super markets and fresh markets)
- Transition not linked to personal health –personal networks & having children
- Trust is central - tapping into networks creates informal networks of legitimacy that the source of the product is authentic
- Families often buy organic for their children or supplement everyday food with organic products
- Only three households consumed only organic products. 40 families bought organic fruits and vegetables from time to time, or supplemented monthly shopping with organic products

Implications

- ❑ Sustainable food practice needs to be understood as embedded within specific cultural understandings
- ❑ The notion of 'green' in relation to food practice is ambiguous
- ❑ Campaigns like "Think Eat Save" have to be placed in cultural contexts – are they relevant to a context like Bangalore?
- ❑ Relationship between organic food and sustainable consumption is not significant in Bangalore
- ❑ No clear relationship between environmental concern and sustainable consumption
- ❑ Focus can be shifted to sustainable practices rather than sustainable consumption
- ❑ Instead focus has to be on incorporating and clarifying key moments and agents of transformation (personal health, role of children, personal networks)