

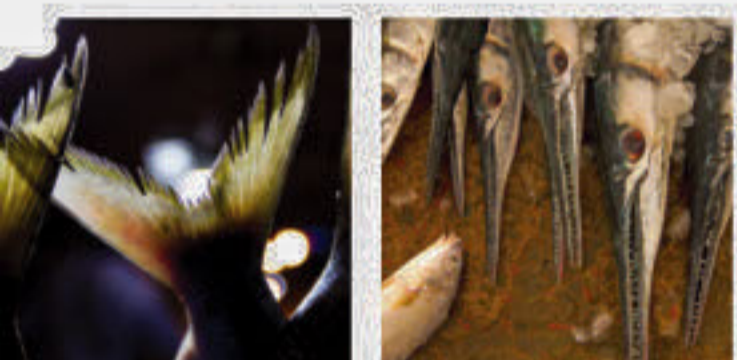


**SPECIAL FEATURE**

# Bounty and beyond

We see our world as a generous place - bearable, tolerable, liveable. If we

throw the fishing net, we could expect to catch enough to make for dinner. Similarly, the long-stretching fields provide us with grains and



**C**AN our world stay this way forever? Trying to answer this reminds us of the world population. To feed all the human beings of the planet, science had to interfere: the world is bountiful, but even its bounty needed to be stretched and boosted in order to keep up with the growing population.

On one hand, there is our affection for indigenous varieties and the home-grown. On the other, there is the produce of science: food made using various technologies, modern farming materials and techniques that ensure food security.



**COMING TO TERMS**

Shykh Seraj, journalist, agriculture development activist and the host of the TV programme Hridoye Mati O Manush aired in Channel i, explains why hybrids are necessary.

"Hybrid seeds give a greater yield, which is very important if you want to have enough food to feed the enormous, growing population. You can invent a hybrid crop specifically to solve a problem that the normal variety suffers from. For example, there are drought-tolerant hybrid crops for countries and places where drought is a severe problem," he informs.

Shykh Seraj also talks of bio-fortified crops. "Malnourishment is a grave problem in our country and in the world at large. Scientists and researchers are fighting hard to eradicate this problem. And one of the ways they have found to deal with this is biofortification," he says.

Biofortification, as defined by World Health Organisation (WHO), is "the process by which the nutritional quality of food crops is improved through biological means such as conventional plant breeding."

Shykh Seraj explains it with an example. "There is zinc insufficiency in the mass people of our country. Now how do



you tackle this? How can you provide zinc to people so that the deficiency is met? Your answer is zinc-fortified rice. Bangladeshi rice breeders have been the first in the world to produce biologically fortified zinc-enriched rice, consumption of which means the intake of zinc, thus helping the population minimise a nutrient insufficiency."

On the other hand, perhaps no other kind of food has seen so much controversy as Genetically Modified (GM) food. While experts are engaged in a heated debate on the safety of GM foods and its long-term environmental and health

## FOR THE LOVE OF THE 'DESHI'

For my grandmother, the early morning cock-a-doodle-doo of the rooster in her 'uthan' (front-yard) had always been the wakeup alarm. Having spent all her life in a village, her family had always extended to include a range of chickens and a hoard of cows. Very rarely did she buy chicken from the market, and seldom did she need a milkman. And when she did come to live with us, the city folks, she always refused to eat farm-bred chicken, opting instead for 'deshi murgi'.

Whether we are villagers or urban dwellers, most of us love our indigenous varieties of food and those that are home-grown. 'Deshi murgi' or free range chicken is perhaps the best example. Most of us prefer to eat free-range chicken to those that are commercially produced in farms. Lubna Aziz, aged 46 and a mother of two, is no different. She believes that the taste of free range chicken is much better.

"They are essentially free-range chicken. The environment in which they grow up is natural. And other than the food given to them, they also forage for food and grow up in a natural process. This makes them stronger. And somehow, this translates to making their meat tastier," she opines. "But many farms provide feeds that are synthetic to make the chicken grow quicker and fatter, which, I personally feel, can be detrimental to my health when I eat the chicken. Also, the idea that the chicken did not move about much in a natural habitat makes it seem rather 'artificial' to me. So of course, the taste will invariably vary between these two types."

For Lubna, it's not just about such chickens. She even prefers the eggs of these chickens over those bred in farms. "The meat and eggs of the chicken depends a lot on the food it eats," she believes.

Even the fish that grows naturally and freely is believed to taste better. "These days, the bazaars are filled with farmed and cultivated fish. Take 'koi' for example. The commercially cultivated ones are larger, but their taste is not very good," Lubna says. She prefers those that grow naturally, in a free and uncontrolled environment, without much intervention from man. And it's not just animals; there is also a preference for the local ginger, garlic, onions, etc.

The taste of home-grown, local and free-range food remains unparalleled. Our palate has a special preference for 'deshi' products that simply cannot be replaced with farm-bred or other varieties.

By M H Haider

implications, general consumers are trying to grasp what this concept actually is.

Genetically modified foods are those that are made from organisms that underwent specific changes in their DNA. Through genetic engineering, scientists mix desirable genes from different species and produce new genetically-altered crosses, with the hope of attaining the benefit of higher production and greater nutritional value. But many experts, including Shykh Seraj, are sceptic and worries that there may be dire consequences.

**CAN'T IGNORE SCIENCE**

Which of the myriad foods is the best, you ask? The native and free-range ones are surely favoured for taste and are believed by many experts to be safer to health and are the most environmentally friendly. But, the question is, will the produce be ample for the whole world?

"If the Green Revolution in the decades of the mid-twentieth century had taught us anything, it is that through using science and technology, you can boost production to the extent that it is possible to feed the entire population. Can you ignore such sciences and technologies?" Shykh Seraj questions.

That Green Revolution is believed to have saved millions of people from starvation by ensuring food security.

"If you throw your fishing net out in a random water body, you might catch many fish, but it is also true that you might not get any. Now, if you throw this net on your pond which you use for cultivation, you will, definitely, get plenty," he propagated.

So, he concludes with the advice of enriching and conserving Bangladesh's gene bank. "We have thousands of varieties of rice, with distinct characteristics. Even to create hybrid, we need crossbreeding between varieties," he advocated.

Nature has given us its bounty. It is up to us to protect it, use it, and, increase it so that no one goes hungry.

By M H Haider  
Photo: Sazzad Ibne Sayed