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### Nutritional Literacy as Resistance to Nutritional Imperialism: Food Diplomacy in Higher Education through Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam

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#### Introduction

Globalisation of food systems has led to the proliferation of Western and corporate food styles in other cultures. This has been at the cost of local food knowledge and has been collectively referred to as 'Nutritional Imperialism'. This concept of cultural, economic, and ideological dominance of food behaviour by major nations and MNCs has been responsible not only for changes in food behaviour but also for the on of cultural identity and local food knowledge.<sup>1</sup>

In such a situation, the role of institutions of higher learning becomes critical in fostering critical consciousness regarding food, culture, and power. Nutrition literacy, which is the capacity to interpret and apply knowledge of food, can empower students to make educated, values-driven, and culture-driven food decisions.<sup>2</sup> When coupled with the philosophical perspective of the world as one family, referred to as 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' in the Indian tradition, nutrition education can transform from a health-centred subject to one of 'cultural respect, peace, and harmony. This paper examines the way in which nutritional literacy can function as a type of resistance to nutritional imperialism and the way in which food diplomacy in higher education, rooted in the ideals of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, can facilitate respect and promote global relationships.

#### Nutritional Imperialism:

Nutritional imperialism can be defined as the takeover and infiltration of traditional food culture and practices in developing nations by powerful nations and international markets. This is a phenomenon that acts through economic power and globalisation, in which ultra-processed foods spread rapidly. The takeover is not just through power but through influencing "ambitions, aspirations, and lifestyles through food," using Western food as a symbol of success.<sup>3</sup> The Globalisation process has also contributed to this problem. Fast food

<sup>1</sup> Raj Patel, *Stuffed and Starved: Markets, Power and the Hidden Battle for the World Food System* (2007).

<sup>2</sup> Vidgen, H. & Gallegos, D., *Defining Food Literacy and Its Components*, 45 *Appetite* 50 (2014).

<sup>3</sup> Vandana Shiva, *Stolen Harvest: The Hijacking of the Global Food Supply* (2000).

restaurants, packet foods, sweet beverages, and heavily processed convenience foods have spread to even the most distant parts of Earth. Traditional foods, which consist mainly of high contents of grains, beans, vegetables, and local foods, are also gradually being substituted by energy-rich and nutritionally poor foods. This has largely contributed to increased rates of obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disorders, and psychiatric problems in developing and developed countries alike. In this sense, nutritional imperialism has also created a paradox in which development has to mean not only economic change, but also its own dangers, in this case, of a special biomedical kind.<sup>4</sup>

In these respects, the need for resistance against nutritional imperialism cannot be satisfied by mere recommendations on what people eat. It calls for an understanding of the critical aspects of food system dynamics, the beneficiaries of these dynamics, and the silenced voices in these dynamics. Nutritional literacy may serve as a tool in facilitating all these. Learners can perceive food as a cultural, political, and ethical concern once they are made aware of these aspects. Nutritional imperialism thus creates an arena for the application of education, culture, and food ethics. There is a philosophical underpinning in “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” in respect of the application of education, culture, and food ethics.

#### ***Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam as a Framework:***

“Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” - it means “the world is one family.” This slogan was taken from some of India's ancient philosophical texts and represents a view of humanity as one in which we are all equal and share equal responsibilities, despite who we are and where we come from. “There will be no distinction in any shape or form amongst nations and communities. This means no superiority of any culture or any nation or community.” “Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam” represents culture as something in which we have to show equality and share equal responsibilities to “people and nature in relation to food.”<sup>5</sup>

Food, in the spirit of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam, is not an article of commerce, but a part of the global heritage of humanity. Every culture's culinary traditions embody the accumulated wisdom of past generations about climate, land, and their cultures' and societies' relation to their food and their bodies. To be diverse in the matter of food, therefore, is the same as being committed to humanity in general. Nutritional imperialism, of course, contrasts diametrically with the principle of diversity.<sup>6</sup> The philosophy of Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam provides an ethical foil in terms of its tenets of coexistence, cultural integrity, and sustainability. Thus,

<sup>4</sup> World Health Organization, *Healthy Diet* (2020).

<sup>5</sup> Upanishads, Maha Upanishad, Verse 6:72.

<sup>6</sup> UNESCO, *Cultural Diversity and Development* (2010).

Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam provides a strong philosophical basis for connecting nutritional literacy with resistance to nutritional imperialism. It underpins an education imperative wherein learning about food is at the same time learning about humanity, ethics, and harmony in a shared world.

### **Food Diplomacy in Higher Education:**

A Higher Education Institution has its own special advantage when it comes to food diplomacy. A Higher Education Institution consists of different cultures and students from across different countries. Food places, cultures, exchange programs, and international students form an excellent setting where food can be used as a cultural tool. If students are exposed to different foods and their stories, they will gain knowledge about the culture and people behind that particular food.<sup>7</sup>

Food diplomacy with political-ethical undertones in a different form would be the strength of challenging stereotyping and the imbalance of power through the voices of marginalised food cultures. Food cultures in universities and institutions celebrating indigenous food cultures go contrary to the notion of erasure and dignity for dignity's sake and have a relation with Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam ideology in its oneness in respect and not in terms of assimilation.

### **Nutritional Literacy as Resistance:**

Nutritional literacy may become resistant if it empowers students to question the mainstream discourse on food and can "read" the relations of power that lie in the global food system. Such students do not become the passive receivers of the marketed trend on food; instead, nutritionally literate individuals will begin to critically ask the following questions: "Who produces this food? Who enjoys the benefits of this food? Which knowledge has been made redundant and replaced with this food?"<sup>8</sup> This will reduce the invisible strength of nutritional imperialism because the strength of the imperialism of food and nutrition lies in the fact that it is passively consummated and culturally imitated.

By learning more about the social, cultural, and political factors of food, students can rebuild their connections with their traditional and indigenous food systems. This is because many of these traditional and indigenous food systems are, in effect, more sustainable and healthy since they have developed in sync with their environmental factors for many centuries. By learning more about the importance of these traditional and indigenous food systems, students will definitely not look upon them as outdated and unnecessary, but rather maintain them.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Joseph Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (2004).

<sup>8</sup> Raj Patel, *supra* note 1.

<sup>9</sup> Vandana Shiva, *supra* note 3.

Nutritional education can be transformed and expanded to an education on power, an education on culture, and an education on identity. Through teaching critical and intentional eating habits, higher education can promote a culture of resistant, diversity-loving, and ideally balanced dwellers in a global food culture.

### **Integrating Nutritional Literacy, Food Diplomacy, and Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam:**

An integrated framework of nutritional literacy, food diplomacy, and Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam would help create an ethical, inclusive, and respectful culture for food education. Nutritional literacy is imbued with critical skills of the food systems, while food diplomacy thus enables cultural conversations; Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam carries an ethical vision regarding the treatment of cultures with dignity and respect. Combined, this framework resists nutritional imperialism and engenders global citizenship.

Another crucial input that would be needed is the teachers' qualifications. Indeed, teachers need training not only in nutrition education but in cultural knowledge and morality education as well. Teachers with the capacity to comprehend the ideals and morals of a given culture concerning food would have the potential to guide their students in a manner that brings about a critical understanding. This would, therefore, become an added advantage with the courses offered for the teachers.<sup>10</sup>

Thus, by means of this holistic approach, institutions of higher education are able to effect a transformation in food education and convert it into a realm of resistance, dialogue, and peace. Nutritional literacy turns into critical consciousness, food diplomacy becomes a cultural practice, and Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam becomes the heart of education.

### **Conclusion:**

Concluding, as an argument that has run throughout the course of this paper, nutritional literacy is far more than merely a skills issue in relation to health. It is, in fact, serious cultural and ethical education in the world that has been shaped by nutritional imperialism, in which the global nutritional regime of powerful food systems has dislocated and delegitimised local cultural traditions.

The nutritional literacy paradigm outlined serves as a resistance to nutritional imperialism and, at the same time, promotes an understanding of the world. In line with the 'Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam' vision, it encourages a world where civilisations come together on a, by and large, level playing ground and food is shared in respect. In the situation of Viksit Bharat @ 2047, this will facilitate the development of citizens who will be healthy, culturally confident, and ethically responsible individuals.

<sup>10</sup> UNESCO & WHO, *Making Every School a Health-Promoting School* (2021).