

“Good talk at meals is a rarity, an art we still have to develop...To have conversation at meals involves a special kind of hunger. The great French philosopher of gastronomy Brillat-Savarin made a distinction between the pleasures of eating and the pleasures of the table, the latter meaning convivial talk about subjects worth talking about. Shared food can contribute a sense of well-being and friendliness, but also a great deal more. If you always serve exactly the same kind of food, you will soon run out of new things to say about it. More exotic cooking has expanded the conversation into other civilizations and other centuries. In the past, food stimulated rather awesome thoughts, conducive to silence. Each ingredient had magic qualities. Today, we are beginning to return to the notion that eating is participation in the processes of nature...The time will come, I hope, when those who influence our ideas on food, the writers of newspaper articles about restaurants, and the makers of TV cooking shows, will begin to discuss the quality of the conversation which their delicious meals induce, and not concentrate only on the decor of restaurants, or the technicalities of recipes. We need to invent a new poetry of food, as our ancestors invented a language of flowers.”

- Theodore Zeldin

Conversations: How Talk Can Change Our Lives (1998)

The Taste of Dialogue¹

- Shikshantar Andolan <shikshantar@yahoo.com>

Today’s fast food world has brought with it fast talk and superficial chatter. Many people have not only lost the space and time for healthy, home-cooked meals, but also for deeper dialogue. Most conferences and meetings do not give much serious attention to the role of food. Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner are seen as ‘breaks’ or ‘distractions’ from the meeting rather than as integral parts of the larger event. Fried, fatty foods (such as, *puri* and *bhaji*), highly caffeinated drinks (tea, coffee, colas), all affect the energy level and mood of participants – not to mention their short- and long-term health. Very little attention is given to understanding how the quality of our food affects the quality of our thought, the quality of our relationships and the quality of dialogue.

All over India, there are many ways that food has traditionally served to bring people together. For example, in many households, pickles are made in large quantities as it is also a way of preserving a particular fruit or vegetable for the whole year. The process requires many working hands. So for making pickles and even *pappads* (wafer chips), several families come together. All these community kitchen activities are also spaces where people talk, share jokes and sing songs. In Punjab, people use a *tandoor* (mud oven) to make *rotis* (bread). Since it takes a lot of wood to heat a *tandoor* up, often four to five families get together to light it up

¹ At the World Social Forum, in Mumbai, January 2004, we co-hosted a session on ‘We Are How We Eat: Food and Learning’. Details can be found in *Other Worlds of Power* <www.swaraj.org/shikshantar/otherworlds.htm>. This essay comes out of the insights gained during and after that dialogue.

at one place and make their *rotis* together. It is called a *Sanjha Chullah*, or a shared kitchen/stove. During the month of Ramadan, when people open their fast in the evenings, they all eat from a common plate, which also symbolizes an act of deep solidarity.

In New York City, USA, food justice activists, Bryant Terry and Anna Lappe, have helped to launch a movement to connect healthy food with meaningful conversation: **Eat Grub Parties**. These are community-building dinners that bring together diverse groups of artists, writers, teachers, activists, performers, and more to share good meals, good company and good energy. These gatherings can be hosted by anyone in their own homes. One can invite new and old friends – preferably those who might have conflicting ideas about politics, life, and food – to share their experiences. Each Grub Party centers around healthful meals made from locally available, sustainably grown and organic foods (this kind of food is called “grub”). Each guest is invited to share a gift at the party – be it a delicious cuisine, a self-created song or poem, something made by their own hands, or a vital conversation topic. To learn more about the Eat Grub movement, or to get more ideas for hosting your own Grub Party, visit www.eatgrub.org.²

Creating time for participants to cook together in small groups during a conference is also another way to open up new kinds of dialogue. Sharing favorite recipes with each other often opens up dialogues about family experiences, deeper understandings about the local place, questions about our own health and lifestyles. Many cooks in the kitchen tend to inspire the creative juices, which leads to brainstorming and creating new food delicacies. Peeling and chopping together helps us to transcend ideological differences and generate new bonds. Serving the food to the whole group can also be a powerful expression of love and generosity towards the entire group. It symbolizes a real commitment to the well-being of each participant. The process of cooking together often helps to generate a profound sense of shared community among the participants, which can lead to more intimate dialogues.

Thinking about our food is also a chance to take a stand for the kind of world we want to live in. The way food affects our personal and collective health, the amount of chemicals or preservatives used, the treatment of farm workers, the impact of the agriculture on the natural environment: we get the opportunity to delve into all these important issues when we take our food seriously.

² In India, for more information on healthy, organic food at your next gathering, contact Vijaya Venkat and The Health Awareness Centre in Mumbai health_awareness_centre@hotmail.com.