

Indian Superfoods

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 Juggernaut

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Introduction

‘If you want to be a super hit, you must find young women to follow you,’ said a casting director to an aspiring actor at a coffee shop in Oshiwara. A friend from Italy who’s also a famous DJ asked me over chai and toast, early one morning, ‘Who do you think made the Beatles?’ I drew a blank and raised my eyebrows. ‘Teenage women,’ she announced. ‘You get the women to follow you, the rest of the world follows.’ I thought of my time in Masai Mara, when a lioness walked away without giving a damn and the lion immediately got up and followed her. ‘See that,’ whispered my guide. ‘Always male follow female, always. That’s the rule.’

Once upon a time, not very long ago, it was

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the women in our homes who controlled what, when and how much we ate. And both the genders participated in food decisions and preparations. Till that time there was no such thing as diabetes. The latest buzzword, diabetes is the burden of obesity and diabetes that the rich of the developing world carry. That's you and me, rich enough for phones, Wi-Fi and 4G.

This richness/technology has shifted the decision of what to eat, how much to eat and when to eat away from women. This power now rests with nameless, faceless pages which download at a crazy speed and inform us about the latest weight-loss aid. Who ate what and knocked off how much is now helping us decide what and how much to eat. None of these pages know anything about our lives, our likes or our wives but they tell us what to eat. They promise us weight loss with just eating something, this something always has to be bought, and it's always expensive, unpronounceable and strikes us as a revolutionary idea. It's also stuff that your grandma doesn't recognize as food, doesn't

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grow locally and is invariably tasteless. It makes you feel that if you somehow suffer your way through it, then surely at the end of it there will be that allusive weight loss.

Is There an Indian Superfood?

Statistics though prove that less than 20 per cent people are successful in keeping the weight off after they have lost it. Not just numbers but your experience will tell you that it's easy to knock the weight off but tough to keep it off. It seems to find a way back to your body, climbs into places where fat never existed and this time stays like it means to stay forever. Nothing, however crash, latest or expensive seems to knock it off.

Into this mix comes the superfood – a food item that promises a miracle and comes from somewhere exotic. Acacia seeds, goji berries, kale – the world seems to discover a superfood every week. There's so much talk about them in the press that the word itself seems to have no meaning. What's a superfood then really, do they even exist, asked my editor, Chiki.

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Is it something that has more nutrition than others?

Is it more powerful?

For me superfoods are foods that, like true love, have stood the test of time. They have at least these five things in common:

1. They grow naturally in the same land you live
2. They are rich in micronutrients and taste
3. Every part of the crop/plant can be used in unique ways
4. They encourage diversity in your diet
5. They lead to a sustainable lifestyle, help local economy and make sound ecological sense

Superfoods Are Always Local

I recently attended a course called the ‘Future of Food’ in Potsdam, Germany, and there we were, participants from all across the developing world, learning about what it would take to feed the world in 2050 – with an exploding population of 9 billion people and the climate change, we are in a lot of trouble. And the focus constantly came back to this – **Future foods are local foods – and people in the**

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developing world give up eating the local foods because it's less prestigious to eat them. And these local superfoods, which in ancient times and not so ancient times (like sixty years ago) were celebrated for their therapeutic, weight-loss and well-being properties, are now undervalued or simply lost. Then the West adopts them as 'novel foods' for weight loss and well-being and they get a second lease of life.

So curcumin enters the health store as an antidote to fatigue and obesity but we don't even know that it's haldi. The moringa powder that we mix in water for omega 3 and stamina is just the drumstick in the sambar and that amaranth is simply the rajgeera chikki you get at railway stations. While everyone in India knows how much dal to add to rice to make khichdi, someone in the West is studying its proportions to earn a PhD. And they will probably also pursue a post-doc in how the proportions change when the person is sick or when seasons change or whether you want to turn it into a dosa or an idli. We take food wisdom so much for granted that we don't even recognize it as something of great importance.

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If nothing, at least let us acknowledge that we are copying the food habits of people who are copying us, or our grandmothers more specifically. So we are just dheela copycats. The stuff worth copying is not jumping queues, five-day workweeks, respecting pedestrian rights, etc., but we are not interested in that.

Sukhasana

It's not just food but even habits that need to be local. Sukhasana (easy pose or happy pose) is nothing but the cross-legged posture that you assume while sitting on the floor to eat. You can start with at least one meal a week in the sukhasana posture and then allow it to grow organically into your life. You will notice that meals in the sukhasana posture always feel lighter, tastier and even happier.

Stanford University researchers have recently built the squatty potty, one that replicates the

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Asian pot, and already sold more than a million of them. They are not too far away from coming up with research to prove that eating meals on the floor in a cross-legged posture is better for the colon, blood-brain barrier and what have you. So you can either do it now as a practise of the culture you are born into or you can do it later, once someone acquires a patent on it.

Superfoods Are All about Food Traditions

Superfoods are compassionate and wise, like the Buddhist deities Avalokiteshwara and Manjushri, because without them in equal measure, there is no real power. At least according to the lama in Tabo monastery in Spiti, and I believe him.

Superfoods don't just stand the test of time but they are compassionate to the other plants that grow around them. They coexist, striking a symbiotic relationship with the soil, climate and living beings on their land. They are versatile, like Asha Bhosle,

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who can sing the bhajan and cabaret like she means it.

Superfoods can be used as therapy, will lend themselves to rituals and even bring income to those who grow them. In that sense these are the wise foods, ones that know they must bring pleasure to the palate, nourishment to the body and even work as medicine when required.

And it's exactly this quality of our native grains, fruits and vegetables that gives them the power to be used in every possible form. In that sense they are not just powerful but also empowering foods. The bark and stems, the raw and the ripe fruit, the leaves and the seeds, every part is usable, unique in its therapeutic properties, and nourishment value and tasty to boot.

While one part can be turned into a sabzi, another part will provide edible oil and all this while retaining nitrogen (natural fertilizer) in the soil, beautifying the locale and providing shade to those who wish to sit next to it. Basically, indigenous crops do what big food companies don't – they own their waste. They

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are in fact zero-waste – from being used as a natural fertilizer to being turned into a jhadoo or even into a fabric, they leave behind zero footprint. They are ecologically smart.

Double Burden of Malnourishment

The world is facing a double burden of malnourishment. Where the poor are denied the easy-to-assimilate protein that comes from dal–chawal, for example, and this leads to deformities or even death. And the rich, because of their disconnect with reality, don't think of dal–chawal or khichdi as protein and want to eat more meat for protein or simply eat quinoa salad. And this switch from local to more industrialized or exotic food is at the root of diabetes. Today, the cost of obesity is 2.1 trillion dollars – that's as high as armed conflicts. So every time you tsk tsk about terrorism around the globe, know that

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this culture of eating certain things to receive a certain nutrient which magically turns us thinner is, at least in terms of expenditure, the same as armed conflict.

National Geographic brought into focus five steps that would help create a more sustainable environment and reduce this double burden of malnourishment on the globe. These are:

1. Freeze agricultural footprint (eat regional)
2. Grow more on the same land (rotate crops)
3. Use resources more efficiently (optimize water usage)
4. Shift diets (diversify) (eat less meat)
5. Reduce waste

Superfoods Are Often Forgotten

Some of the superfoods in this book you may have known, some are unknown or less known, while some have been celebrated since the time of the Vedas.

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Based on popular perception, you can divide them into these three groups:

1. So yummy that they can't possibly be healthy – ghee, rice, coconut, banana
2. Too local or desi to have any fat-burning or other health benefits – jackfruit, sugar cane, kaju
3. Never heard of them – aliv, kokum, ambadi

Or we can have another type of division:

1. Full of cholesterol – ghee, coconut, kaju
2. Too sweet or too many calories – rice, jackfruit, sugar cane, banana
3. Too low profile to be useful – aliv, kokum, ambadi

Now, of course, as you read on, you will see how these perceptions are totally wrong. But what you should know right away is that these superfoods are not just your pill to weight loss but to an irreversible and sustainable weight loss. And besides weight loss these will make you look good – right now,

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with glowing skin, lustrous hair and flat stomach, and after you are gone as responsible citizens who didn't kill the earth and economy in their greed to get thin. And while looking good, it gives you the other benefits of good looks – of sustainable blood sugars, of a thriving libido and fertility levels and of a calm state of mind. After all, a skinny waist is wasted without good sex, stable sugars and sharp intellect.

The Return of the Langot

There's no such thing as an original idea, Rujuta, said my seventy-five-year-old wise man, there's only original execution. He was bang on target. Take the case of nappies. All of us in the developing countries, the rich specifically, have switched to these plastic and foam filled nappies as a cool, hassle-free and smart alternative to the langot. The latest trend among the super-rich, cool and eco-conscious of New York, however, is the langot, as the mass-produced nappies give

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rashes to babies and create ecological waste. The weekly stock for the 'cloth diapers' arrives at your home, and at the end of the week it gets collected, washed and dried using hot water and plant-based detergents. If you tell this to your grandma she's gonna have an ROFL moment. You and she could have a similar business idea. You do the website, she puts in the intellectual capital, you two have a roaring success of a business and it's good for babies and the earth.

Superfoods Always Work with Others

The most endearing thing about these superfoods is that they are not vain – you have to eat them with other things for them to work. They coexist, not just with each other but even among themselves. Rice, for example, has hundreds of indigenous varieties just in Odisha – there's a sticky rice for the lactating mother and another one for the

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young groom that he must have the night before his wedding to please his wife. The banana also has multiple varieties, so do sugar cane and coconut, each one of them. The same goes for our others. So they are not here to stake claim to be the only ten foods that you must eat but simply to say that these ten foods you must eat along with the other local stuff.

After all, these ten superfoods are smart, they know that diversity is the key to survival and sustainability. Rice wants to go with dal and a blob of ghee. The ghee wants to be on your bhakri, roti and even on your feet. The kaju will go with rava or moong to turn into a halwa or with jaggery to become a chikki. The jackfruit will lend itself beautifully to your biryani or become your midday snack. The banana can be rolled inside a roti for lunch or you can mix it with other veggies for undhiyo. The kokum likes the company of sprouts or even chaat. The ambadi will add more bite to your millets, while the aliv is happy to blend into sugar or jaggery with coconut or simply to garnish your sandwich.

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As you will see in the following chapters, it's the combination of foods that performs magic in our bodies. Superfoods are also great at enabling other foods and nutrients to perform their miracles.

You Have to Style Your Own Superfood

Endless possibilities is a super thing. **And the body after all is used to a wholesome and not an isolation approach.** So when you read about these foods, don't start eating them in bulk quantities or with just hot water first thing in the morning. In all the chapters I have listed how to eat these foods, but the best way to eat them is through your regional food culture and using your home recipes. Call your mom and ask her how to make or use the foods that you read about. Or better still, have a family get-together where you document how the food is prepared, served and stored with inputs from the grandparents, aunts and uncles. Make a family heritage piece of all the foods that you eat in your own unique style, or frame a recipe and give it as gift or hang it on your wall. Who knows, forty years on, your family can

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sell these for millions, like an art piece that not only appreciates in value but till then gives you sukoon, and good health too.

How Much to Eat

Staying silent while eating is the most undervalued aspect of good nutrition. Don't talk, don't read, don't surf, just eat. It will actually put you in touch with yourself and then you will hear the voice of your stomach. Your stomach will guide you in eating the right quantities at every meal. It will slow down the pace at which you are consuming. It will make you feel lighter, younger, calmer with every bite. The space will reverberate with inner peace and you will hear a voice in your head go:

Pakakarta tatha bhokta, annadata sukhi bhava.

May the person who cooks, the one who eats and the one who provides the food, may all be happy. And just like that, peace will return to the world, at least to your world.

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In summary, superfood is food that moves beyond just health and nutrition. It suits your genetic make-up, it blends into not just your regional cuisine, but even into your culture. It tells you a story, of the history of your land, its flavour reminds you of the good laughs you shared with your cousins, its aroma makes you feel like your grandma is still in the room, watching over you, giggling with you, urging you to eat just one more bite.