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Abstract: Gender: Women and Cooking Oil

When one thinks of problems associated with allocating foods, cooking oils do usually come to mind. The recent epidemics with local cooking oil in India, primarily from mustard seed, have had many perverse effects. Indigenous oil seeds, are high in oil content, are easy to process, and are eco-friendly and healthy. These oils are available to the poor at low costs. The bulk of oil processing was done by about one million expellers. This client to retailer relationship, builds community ties, is fresh, nutritious and unadulterated.

Women in many parts of India are responsible for buying cooking oil (mustard seed oil) and are available at a low price, from local retailers, guaranteeing food safety. However in 1998, local mustard oil processing was banned and soybean oil was imported alternatively. The sudden lack of local mustard oil was very problematic for poor women. Often their children would go to bed hungry because they would not eat food cooked in palm or soybean oil. Being poor, they could not afford the packaged oil after the ban of local processors was instated. Indian food has not traditionally been cooked in soybean oil, and thus, has not been adopted as a substitute. It is worthy to add that multinational corporate interests were partly responsible for the introduction of genetically modified soybean products in India.

Beyond breaking tradition, community ties and jeopardizing the local-processing industry and with it the food culture and economy that depend on it, the introduction of non-indigenous cooking oils, may have hazardous health effects for women and their children.

Soybeans contain lectins, which interfere with our immune systems. When isolated from soybeans, lectins have been found to be lethal when injected into rats. Soybeans also contain phytic acid, which interferes with the absorption of nutrients such as calcium and iron. Deficiencies of these two minerals are symptoms of malnutrition in women and children in poor areas of countries. It is essential that all the nutritional benefits foods have to offer are reaped when one's diet is limited.

Perhaps the most dangerous aspect of soy-based products is their high estrogen content, especially those that are genetically altered. Women who were born to mothers who took synthetic estrogens were found to have three times more miscarriages. Others were found to have a higher risk of cancers, specific to women. Men born to the same group of mothers were found to have higher infertility levels than other men. Soybeans are used in a wide variety of food products, not just in vegetarian meals, as some may suspect.

What has happened in India has only had negative effects on poor people and especially women. What has happened is unnecessary because nature has given societies a diverse selection of foods. The most basic process of purchasing local cooking oils has become quite a conflict in some parts of India. The future of India will be based either on the century-old edible based oil culture or it will become a part of the globalized genetically modified monoculture of soybeans, with the hazards they potentially possess.