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Fast Food World

The old saying "you are what you eat" may always have been true, but perhaps we do not realise the extent to which it has become a defining feature of contemporary societies. The food habits of much of the world have changed faster in the course of the last generation, than at any other time in recorded human history.

What is more, they have changed towards a more uniform, homogenised pattern that is also historically new, besides emanating from one major socio-economic source. Hamburgers (even if they are only made of chicken or vegetables), pizzas and cola are now recognised easily by at least some, and often most, children in every country of the world. The shift to what can only be called the "All-American" meal is now in evidence in countries that were previously thought to be relatively impervious to cultural imperialism, such as China and Japan, and very far gone in other countries.

But this shift in food preferences reflects a much broader and more pervasive change across all our societies in the organisation of work and play, in the ways farming and

consuming are now mediated through giant corporations and in the various methods used to control labour. These changes are obviously the most advanced in the United States, where the fast food boom originated. But they are creeping upon all of us, everywhere, and so it is necessary for us to know what exactly they entail.

In his extremely important book (*Fast Food Nation: The Dark Side of the Ail-American Menu*, New York; Harper Collins 2002) Eric Schlosser provides a fascinating, often chilling, and always insightful, account of how this industry originated, what it has meant for the way food is produced and consumed in the US, what it has done to workers' conditions, how it has changed values, social attitudes and even the landscape, and how it is spreading to the rest of the world. The book is now selling well in India bookstores as well, which can only be a good sign.

Schlosser considers food as

both commodity and metaphor, but focuses more tellingly on the commodity. He traces the origins of the business, from the early drive-in barbecues in California and the "Speeder Service System" of the McDonald brothers in the early Fifties, which did; away with, cutlery, dishes and glassware and brought assembly line principles to the commercial kitchen. The subsequent development as an industry, however, was not due to these individual entrepreneurs, but to aggressive businessmen such as Ray Kroc, who converted the still small McDonald business into a major food empire, spread across the US by a franchisee system.

Several features that have become ubiquitous features of the industry were already developed by the Sixties: the emphasis on reducing the role of workers to particular and specialised activities that require relatively little training or supervision; the use of cheaper and more pliable workforce, such as teenagers

or migrant labour; the targeting of children as consumers; the blitzkrieg of often subliminal advertising. But even more than that, the fast food restaurant industry became a forerunner of later developments across other economic sectors, in terms of controlling workers and organising consumers and suppliers.

In particular, it has changed the nature of farming and animal husbandry, encouraging and being closely associated with the move towards contract farming or corporatisation of agriculture and the disappearance of small independent farmers and ranchers. The concentration and growing power of agribusinesses has been in tandem with the worldwide expansion of the fast food industry.

The chapter on meat production in the industrial slaughterhouses is certainly



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not for the squeamish — as one reviewer put it, "enough to make a vegetarian out of Arnold Schwarzenegger."

It is disturbing not only for the gory descriptions of the process itself, but because of the horrifying evidence on the physical hazards created by the emphasis on speed and maximising output, terrible working conditions and poor pay experienced by the workers, who are typically unorganised migrants.

Even vegetarians would feel discomfited by the descriptions of the many chemical additives that go into making the potato chips taste good. But once again, the basic point that is stressed is that the managerial emphasis has always been, and continues to be, on cheapness and cost reduction by all means possible. This has meant much greater pressure on workers, with adverse effects

on safety. Here, as in the slaughterhouses, the systematic moves by the businesses and the US government to reduce monitoring of work conditions and the suppression of evidence on work-related accidents and illnesses reflect the general tendency to ensure cheaper labour.

All this refers mostly to what the industry has done to working conditions, but what it has done to consumers is almost as significant. Because of the focus on lower costs, health and safety standards have been neglected and information requiring potentially expensive processes have been suppressed. This has meant increasing incidence of salmonella and e. coli, bacterial infections, and culminated in the "mad cow" scares which are still not completely done away with.

But even without such problems, fast food is not exactly healthy. The excessive fats and sugar that are contained in the increasing-

ly larger servings have created the most obese population in the history of the world in present-day US, where even young children now suffer from diet-induced heart disease. Obesity is now second only to smoking as the dominant cause of mortality in the US. Greater health consciousness has had some impact, but has not yet managed to break the stranglehold of fast food on the popular diet in the developed world.

Despite all this, this predominant feature of American culture is also one of its more successful exports. Top companies like McDonald's, Coca Cola and Pizza Hut now have many more branches abroad than in the US, and most growth of these companies and their restaurants occurs in developing countries. The strategy for foreign conquest by these companies is called "global realisation."

Part of their success is because they have become

potent symbols of economic development, US-style capitalism. In India, where such companies have been entering significantly, and propagating their particular business model, using franchisees and manipulating consumer preferences, similar implicit perceptions affect the ease with which they can capture markets.

This book has become a bestseller in the US, where its impact has led to comparisons with Upton Sinclair's 1906 book on the meat industry (*The Jungle*). Sinclair's book raised such a public furore that it caused legislative changes in the US that led to substantial improvement of wage and safety conditions in the meat industry in the Twenties. But the forces and lobbies behind the multinational food industry are now so strong that it is likely to take more than one book, no matter how convincing and effective, to cause any major changes. Much more awareness and mobilisation are probably necessary in all the countries in which they operate to prevent a homogenisation of the industry that disempowers both the actual producers and the consumers.