



## India and EAT Lancet Consultation

In person sessions, organised by Bharat Krishak Samaj with support from FOLU India country platform

Today, one of the most significant challenges to humankind is to draw a path towards a sustainable and healthy diet, considering the need to provide affordable nutrition to an ever-increasing population and the effects of food systems on environment; as the current food production pattern is one of the major drivers of environmental degradation, climate instability and transgression of planetary boundaries. Thus, living within the limits set by the scientific community to ensure sustainable production and consumption of healthy diet is necessary. In an attempt to address this issue, EAT-Lancet Commission recently released a report on [Healthy Diets from Sustainable Food Systems](#) (Willet et al. 2019), which talks about a “planetary diet” capable of feeding 10 billion people by 2050 in a manner benefitting both- people and planet, by gradually shifting towards predominantly plant-based diet, and limited intake of animal source proteins.

In context of India, the said report needs to be carefully analysed as India’s per capita consumption of rice, milk and eggs is high with limited consumption of ruminant meat (Vetter et al. 2017). The number of animals raised or slaughtered for beef and buffalo meat in India has been two or three times lower than Europe’s between 2000-2020, as per [FAOSTAT](#). India also scored poorly in Global Hunger Index 2022, with a rank of 107 among 121 countries indicating that child nutrition in India is poor (GHI 2022). Moreover, the cultural and ethnic diversity existing in India which is strongly associated with the numerous food systems existing and the varying degrees of fragility of these food systems towards market-oriented policies is also a crucial factor. Therefore, any dietary guidelines need to lay a primary emphasis on resolving the problems of undernourishment, child stunting, child wasting and child mortality and other nutrition issues, however considering the other associated factors.

As per EAT-Lancet, the ‘planetary diet’ recommendation can be a potential solution to providing nutritious diet in a sustainable manner. Planetary diet largely consists of 8 food groups, with specified intake ranges ensuring that nutritional requirements are fulfilled with a scope of adapting to individual needs. As meat consumption globally is a significant contributor to poor health known to increase the risks of becoming overweight, obese, and instances of developing non-communicable diseases, the focus on plant-based proteins rightly addresses the concerns about health, along with ethical consumption. According to the commission, global uptake of the planetary health diet can reduce approximately eleven million premature adult deaths annually, effectively contributing to a 19-23% overall reduction in premature mortalities annually. Predominantly plant-based diet also addresses the concern about increasing pressure on already scarce resources, mainly land and water. Such pressures lead to increased degradation of environment, which in turn has adverse effects on human health.

Despite being commissioned with good intent, critics have certain arguments against the findings and believe that recommended planetary diet is neither advisable nor feasible (Karpagam 2019). One of the primary concerns is the **affordability** of recommended diet, as its average cost is \$3 to \$5 per day, while the present cost of India diet is about \$0.62 to \$1 per day (TCI-TARINA programme estimates). Despite a much lower cost, hunger rate is already high in India. Additionally, any recommended diet would be expensive for the poor and is not specific to EAT-Lancet diet, as most reference diets are set above the poverty line, indicating that it is the economic system that needs to change (Green 2019).

Besides affordability, experts have also raised concerns about the **generalization** of the diet as it does not cater to individual needs, sub-populations, and potential impacts on microbiome- both environmental and human gut. For example, a predominantly carbohydrate-rich diet can trigger immune system responses in people allergic to gluten (Verkerk 2019). It is therefore important to evaluate potential health implications considering the specific dietary needs of people. Some concerns suggest that recommended planetary diet has been formed to favour industrialized countries like the United Kingdom (Verkerk 2019). According to a recent study, Indian dietary guidelines already have a lower carbon footprint than diet recommended by EAT-Lancet Commission (Ghosh 2021).

The EAT-Lancet diet also **does not consider the diverse Indian cultural** and traditional eating habits and can serve as a potential tool to further aggravate the barriers around caste, religion, and culture (Karpagam 2019). Experts have also expressed concerns about intensification and mandating of food fortification to compensate for essential nutrients, and the long-term health impacts of fortified foods are still under research. Also, livestock has always been an integral part of Indian agriculture and benefits the overall system if operated as an agroecological system (Verkerk 2019). So rather than completely dissociating **animals**, a scientifically developed model integrating livestock and agriculture should be followed.

A question about what humanity should eat and does a “one-size-fits-all” sustainability approach guided in a top-down manner remains. Another question that arises in the Indian scenario is on production, whether diverse nutritious foods can be produced sustainably and profitably by farmers will need further analysis given the multiple production systems that exist in India. Thus, there is a need to encourage discussion among various experts and stakeholders to establish specific ways forward, benefitting both people and the planet, in a decentralised and locally adapted manner.

Under these circumstances, Bharat Krishak Samaj, with support from Food and Land Use Coalition India, is organizing a consultation in India by EAT Foundation and team with experts in the food and diet sector to invite comments on the EAT-Lancet report. The event is scheduled on 17th November 2022 in New Delhi.

## References

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