

Supermarket for Our Family

Satoko CHATTERJEE (India)

The crossroads that are less than a one-minute walk from our house are our family's "supermarket." From around 7:30 to 11:00 in the morning, vegetable, fish and chicken vendors sit on the ground to open their "shops." There are about five vendors in all, and the shoppers are all local neighborhood residents. There are also one or two permanent shops where we can buy groceries such as eggs and sugar, as well as a teahouse. Here, shopping is mainly men's work, so this place is usually quite busy with fathers who shop before going to work in the morning. We can, of course, go to larger markets by bicycle or by *auto (three-wheeler type share ride compact vehicle)*, but I get our food here most of the time.

Everything is certainly different from Japanese supermarkets, where processed foods such as freshly prepared deli items and cooked meals are packed in foam polystyrene packages and sold in neat lines. Here all the food is sold as is, and fish and chicken is cooked on the spot. Vegetables are sold by weight, so price changes directly affect people's lives. Price changes are caused by seasonal factors, natural disasters including floods or droughts, festival seasons, as well as by transportation strikes caused by political problems, which affect food deliveries. Currently vegetables are getting more expensive due to signs of a late rainy season and a drought, which makes peoples' financial situations more difficult. Yet, it may be easier than being vexed by the mysterious phenomenon of the Japanese situation, where domestic produce and foods are more expensive than imported ones. In addition, it is good that we have less waste by not overwrapping goods as is done in Japan.

However, we cannot be optimistic about the safety of vegetables and fruits in India, either. I often find articles in the newspaper revealing that some produce is colored with chemicals to make it look fresher, and that other fruits and vegetables retain residual agricultural chemicals. They say that agricultural chemicals exceeding the standard level are found in more than 75% of the items studied, and what's more, it is more common in green vegetables. I feel scared when reading an article titled, for instance, "Your soup has poison in it." I hear some elderly housewives complaining that vegetables sold nowadays do not smell as they used to, because they are grown with chemical fertilizers and agricultural chemicals. So they eat them after boiling them once because they are not safe.

I have heard that mangos and tea leaves which are exported from India are grown in a way that meets the standards of residual agricultural chemicals of Japan and other countries. When we look at this reality from the opposite side, it means that local people in India must eat mangos and tea that are rich in residual chemicals. Although there are some NGOs in India, including our group, which are engaged in activities to promote organic farming and food safety, we still have a long way to go before consumer awareness is raised and a movement such as consumerism begins. This morning, I went to the “supermarket” for our family to buy vegetables as usual. Every time I see, for example, rosy red sweet potatoes, I wonder what specific steps I should take and what I should do to stop this kind of behavior as a consumer.



▲ Vegetable vendors