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The 100-dollar hamburger

In his latest book, Chandran Nair argues that rampant consumption in Asia means catastrophe for the world. As its author stops by The Bookworm this month, **Clarissa Sebag-Montefiore** asks him why

In Chandran Nair's vision of a future better world, a burger would cost 100USD. The era of penny-pinching patties would be over. Instead, drastic repricing would factor in the true value of the resources used to produce meat – from wear of the land to water wastage and carbon.

This is one argument in *Consumptionomics*, the radical book by Nair, an environmental consultant and founder of the Global Institute For Tomorrow (GIFT) think tank. Talking at The Bookworm this month, he will call for an end to the Western-led consumption now enveloping Asia's emerging economies.

For Nair, the case is clear: the world's finite resources will buckle under the pressure of as many as three billion Asians entering the consuming classes for the first time, newly emancipated from poverty, and hungry for a slice of America's

pie. 'The problem is that there are too many people and they've been told they can have this [Western way of life] – but they can't. We need to rewrite the rules,' the author states emphatically over the phone from his home in Hong Kong.

For Nair, who grew up alongside eight siblings in Malaysia and supported himself through university in the UK by cleaning toilets in London's West End, *Consumptionomics* is a challenge for Asians to stand up and start asking questions. By 2050, America and Europe will account for just ten per cent of the world's population; the rising masses in Asia, however, will make up 60 per cent. The 21st century will be Asia's, and to prosper, he argues, leaders must reject Western-led capitalism.

If, at first glance, critics think that Nair is a tree-hugging hippie, they would be wrong. The author – who for years worked as a senior executive for the environmental consultancy ERM – espouses practical measures

over intellectual ideals. At its heart, *Consumptionomics* is a call for governments to take action now.

Certainly, the statistics are alarming. China, once the land of the bicycle, has now overtaken America as the world's biggest car market. By 2020, it is predicted that over 330 million vehicles will be careering down the country's roads, placing a colossal strain on world oil reserves. And if that is hard to picture, try to imagine this: if the Chinese take up the West's insatiable appetite for poultry, by 2050 they will be eating 120 billion

birds annually (Americans eat a paltry nine million today).

'No one has been bold enough to say this cannot be sustained and instead we're having dumbed-down conversations about going environmental,' Nair insists. 'It's much deeper than that; it's a political conversation about rights, access to resources and how we live. In the 21st century, the tensions between nations will hinge on one and one thing only: access to resources.'

The turning point came during the 2008 financial crisis, when the mantra of more is best crashed down among the debris of the developed world. To restart the world economy, leaders are encouraging Asians to spend more and save less. But if Asia develops along the route of the industrialised nations, global devastation will follow. To avoid cataclysm and chaos, Nair foresees a future with far-reaching – and, if necessary, draconian – constraints on consumption. In return, he believes that wealth will be divided more equitably, and, with resources used properly and fairly, billions more will gain access to the basic human rights of safe food, clean water, sanitation, housing and education.

For this, strong states are needed. The suggestion, of course, is that China has the ability to intervene far more quickly and effectively than democratic India, the second of the two giant nations dictating the future of Asia. 'The legitimacy of governments will depend not on whether they have a charade of an election going forward every five years to appease the White House and Europe, but on whether they are able to address the issue of providing the majority with the most basic human rights.'

This is spelled out in the book: 'The central duty of the state must be recast – from protecting individuals and their property to protecting natural capital and ecological services.' It's a strong statement and one that, unsurprisingly, has created uproar. Nair experienced a backlash in the liberal British *Guardian* for suggesting that 'benign authoritarianism' might be more effective; his announcement on Bloomberg that car ownership is not a human right likewise created waves.

'In the West, the individual is God,' he says, clearly exasperated. Nair believes that what you or I do ultimately doesn't matter – the scale is too small, and the problem too big. Only governments can control the masses – and they must do it by whatever means necessary.

So should we be scared? 'Will it be catastrophic for everyone? I hope not,' he muses. 'But if China and India don't succeed, we can say goodbye to controlling climate and mitigating the risk. If they don't get it right, we live in a much bleaker world.'

Chandran Nair talks at The Bookworm on **Thur 4**. See Around Town listings. *Consumptionomics* is available to buy now.