



**Kitchen confidential** Manan and Aparajita, the schoolkids who've embraced veganism

FOOD: VEGANS

## Sylph O' The Green

Veganism is the new food mantra for the hip and happening

NEHA BHATT

### The Vegan View

- Say no to meat because the animals are bred in unsanitary conditions. Cattle legs are often cut off during transportation, to fit more in.
- Say no to dairy because it's unethical; it can involve injecting cattle with hormones to increase milk production
- A meat-free diet lowers blood pressure, cholesterol, the risk of strokes, chances of obesity
- Eating meat contributes to pollution, uses more land, water and energy, leads to deforestation

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**F**or all the time he spends on his computer, 15-year-old Manan Kohli isn't your ordinary teenager. Rather than googling the latest playstation videogame, this class XI boy from Delhi's Modern School is more likely to be browsing the internet for updates on veganism, or connecting with other vegans on Facebook. If your reaction is "vegan, what's that?", perhaps you need to google too. This strict form of vegetarianism, which forbids not just meat but all animal produce—such as eggs and dairy products (and honey, silk and leather as well)—has captured the imagination of young people the world over, Indians included, rather to the dismay of their less than new-agey parents. For Manan it was the death of his pet dog three years ago that plunged him into this abstemious world, his views decisively shaped by the shocking videos on cruelty towards animals he encountered on the internet. When he turned vegetarian, his parents were worried. "I thought they would be proud of me—but they were far from supportive," he recalls. When he decided to embrace veganism, they hit the roof. Even Lord Krishna drank milk, they argued with their rebellious son. But while he may pay lip service to their anxieties about him getting adequate nutrition, Manan is holding firm.

There are a growing number of other young urban Indians out there who have turned their back not just on childhood favourites like butter chicken and fish curry, but also dal makhni, ghee-spattered rotis and creamy shahi paneer. All of 23, Sneha Poojary, a Mangalorean living in Mumbai, was reared on a seafood diet—but you wouldn't think so from the courage of her vegan convictions. "Being vegetarian isn't enough, consuming milk contributes to the unethical farming of cattle," says this avid organiser of vegan pot-luck dinners, busy building a vegan community in Mumbai through blogs and social networking sites. When in campaign mode, she can hold forth at length on the cruelties involved in dairy and poultry farming.

Lurking behind the allure of veganism for young people are a host of factors, ranging from animal love to health concerns, advice from spiritual gurus and the fad appeal of star-studded environmental and animal rights campaigns like PETA's latest, which has actress Lara Dutta covered only in lettuce; or Pamela Anderson's eye-catching 'All Animals Have the Same Parts' advertisement which has her posing in a bikini, her body parts tagged as if by a butcher. Says Manish Jain of Vegan Education Centre, Indore, who receives five to 10 calls a month from young people curious to know more about veganism, "With globalisation and outreach through various media, especially the internet, I see meat-eaters becoming more aware of the source of their food and the suffering attached to it." There are no confirmed figures on the number of vegans in India, but Jain estimates that four out of five converts are below the age of 30.



Himani and her husband Ashi get down to a preparing their vegan dinner (Photograph by Apoorva Salkade)

**S**ome have turned it into a 'couple thing'. When Mumbai-based animal rights activist Himani Shetty became vegetarian, her husband Ashi Anand, who works in finance, followed suit. Later, when she decided to turn vegan, he supported her fully. Drawn, like many others, towards vegetarianism and veganism by a love of animals, Himani says she rarely misses the life she's left behind: "It took me a few months to give it all up, but it's been several years now, and I haven't wanted to go back to eating meat, save for one time when I went to Goa and was tempted into ordering seafood, but couldn't touch it when it reached our table." For her husband, the conversion happened overnight, says Himani, when the couple was watching a documentary called *Planet Earth* on Discovery channel. "He just connected with it," she recalls.

**Dining out is looking up for vegans. There's soya milkshakes, cheese-free pizzas, even vegetarian Peking Duck on offer.**

Similarly, Sujoy D'Souza, now in his early thirties, turned vegetarian more than six years ago with his wife Karol, who he met in Canada. He was already uncomfortable, he says, with the weight he had put on after adopting a meat-heavy diet while living in the West, and Karol's vegetarian ways proved decisive for him. After giving up meat, his energy levels shot up, says Sujoy: "A good two hours of badminton on weekends didn't tire me out any longer." When the couple moved to Bangalore a few years ago, they found themselves increasingly influenced by campaigns against dairy-farming and decided to turn vegan. As a result, their two-year-old daughter Nikita doesn't even know what ice-cream is. "We freeze mango pulp and that's the only ice-cream she knows," laughs Karol. The idea of a young child growing up without milk would horrify many parents, but not them. "We ground black seed (kalonji) for immunity and sesame seed for calcium and sprinkled it over Nikita's food," says Karol. "We even make soya and almond milk at

home".

**E**ven someone as young as Manan knows he is missing out on important vitamin B12—obtained from meat and milk products—and takes supplements to compensate. Still, adapting to life without meat, especially while eating out, and milk products, can take getting used to. “I used to carry a list of ingredients I didn’t want to consume and hand it over to the waiter when I dined out with my family, but my parents asked me to stop,” says Manan ruefully. Others went looking for imported vegan options such as soy sausages and burgers from Fry’s, a South African firm that makes veggie products that are similar to meat in taste, appearance, texture and nutrition. Karol found a Bangalore bakery that made vegan cakes, but was stumped by the paneer-for-veggies rule followed by most airlines, until she learnt to take along snacks on flights.

Dining out, however, is looking up for vegetarians and vegans. Cafe Coffee Day, a chain frequented by young people, has launched a vegan shake (using soy milk and coffee), a popular Mumbai pizzeria has a vegan (i.e. cheese-free) offering on the menu, Delhi eatery Yum Yum Tree’s wheat protein-based mock meat is a hit with diners, including its Vegetarian Peking Duck.



**Eat your ethics** A cheese-free pizza for Mumbai-based vegan campaigner Sneha (Photograph by Dinesh Parab)

For some, however, the easiest way to adapt is learning to cook. Vasantha Rayalu, a 22-year-old iitian from Hyderabad who turned vegetarian more than a decade ago, and vegan recently, is adept at fixing a meal of aloo gobi when he doesn’t feel like stepping out for south Indian tiffin. Himani, a self-confessed foodie, swears by her shepherd’s pie, which substitutes soya beans for minced meat, while Sneha stands by her vegan gulab jamuns. Even young Manan experiments with vegan cakes and pasta.

Even so, parents—his and others’—are inclined to shake their heads in disapproval at what they see as an extremely restrictive diet. Diet guru and medical doctor Shikha Sharma thinks many of their fears are unfounded. “Any evolved society has to become vegetarian eventually,” she says. “It’s a good, healthy trend, and nutrition can be obtained through items like raagi, sesame seeds, nuts and oilseeds. Children too can do without milk once they are weaned off their mother’s milk.” However, Dr Randeep Guleria of the All India Institute of Medical Sciences treads a more cautious line: “Meat and milk products give us relatively better quality protein and in some cases being vegan can lead to severe deficiencies.” He stresses the importance of B 12 supplements, especially in the case of children who are still growing.

Some children, though, are getting backing for their cause from an unlikely quarter—their own grandparents. Pressed by her mother and father to at least eat fish, 15-year-old Delhi girl Aparajita Amar won support from her vegetarian grandparents, living examples of the health benefits of giving up flesh. Sneha, meanwhile, has managed to get her parents on her side, after their initial hesitation. “Their own health reports have been far better after they began eating less meat. But I doubt if they can give it up completely—it’s too built into their system,” says Sneha. Many young people, coming from families that have consumed flesh, milk and ghee for generations, could say the same. But clearly, it’s ideas that consume them, rather than meat and fish, butter, milk and ghee.

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