

Bangalore, Wednesday, 12 Aug 2015



Breaking bread with a group of vegans

A Bangalore Vegan group meets once a month over a potluck meal where deep thought goes into what it eats.

Theresa Varghese , 09 Apr 2010

The venue is Lalbaug, the time two in the afternoon. It's a hot day, the kind where you'd prefer to be in the cool confines of your home indulging in a siesta but, under the shade of a spreading tree, an enthusiastic group is getting ready for a session of food and fun. They settle down with glasses of pulpy grape juice to watch the magician among them perform card tricks. Once the informal show is over, the food that each has brought is laid out and collectively partaken of.

There's a variety of items - things like samosas, pasta salad, hummus, chocolate cake and biscuits, all vegan. It is the Bangalore Vegan group's monthly potluck meet where like-minded people get together to talk, discuss issues and eat.



Bangalore Vegan group. Pic: Theresa Varghese.

For most people, even vegetarians, a vegan is something of an oddity. How can one not eat things that have traditionally been part of Indian vegetarian cuisine - dairy products such as milk, curd and ghee? This is the most common objection. Another oft heard remark is that vegans are extreme in their choice of lifestyle. To you and me, it may seem extreme having to seek substitutes for items that are commonly eaten. However, you have to admit that vegans have a point: that one cannot draw a line when it comes to compassion.

The text book definition of veganism is, '...a lifestyle which seeks to abstain (to the extent possible) from the use of any product or habit or behaviour that might, at any stage of its development, have involved any harm upon any sentient creature. Such harm might be in the form of deliberately inflicted fear, discomfort, injury, or death; or even the unfairness of depriving others of what is rightfully theirs'. If we take the stand that we have no right to use animals unfairly, then we also have to think about how our food is produced and whether that is acceptable to our sense of right and wrong.

For more information on veganism, go to:

- www.indianvegan.com
- www.arfindia.org
- www.sharan-india.org

The Bangalore Vegan group can be contacted at bengaluruvegans@gmail.com

It goes without saying that vegans are people who have given deep thought to what they eat. Usually there's a childhood compassion for animals that sets them on this path. Like Isabel Putinja, a Canadian, who became a vegetarian while a teenager. In Canada, being vegetarian and eating out was not too difficult as there was always some choice. It was when she moved to Europe that she encountered difficulty, both in obtaining vegetarian food as well as prejudice because of her way of life. "People felt I was judging them simply because I had chosen to be vegetarian," she says. "For me, living in the UK was the best. There was so much vegetarian food on offer, due to the large Asian population and because many people in the UK are vegetarians for animal-rights reasons."

Isabel says that coming to Bangalore three years ago - due to her husband's job - was something she really looked forward to. Seeing the multiple choices in this country for a vegetarian, Isabel felt at home. She also felt that

becoming a vegan could be the next logical step in her journey. However, given the many foods she would have to eschew, she wondered whether this step would be too radical. It was around this time that she attended a nutrition workshop wherein the homeopathic doctor explained why a vegan diet is the best for keeping illnesses at bay. When she learnt of the conditions under which milk and eggs are produced for human consumption, Isabel realized she could not continue to eat such products and decided to go vegan on an experimental basis. "I tried it for 30 days, went back to milk to see how I would feel, and then decided that veganism was for me. It took me a year to completely transition to veganism," she points out.

Bangalore Vegan group. Pic: Theresa Varghese.

The prejudice that Isabel encountered as a vegetarian is not uncommon. Since most people have no intention of being cruel to living creatures, they automatically become defensive when meeting people with other lifestyle choices. Dilip Bafna, founder of Animal Rights Fund (ARF), a vegan for 17 years and the person behind the Bangalore Vegan group says, "When people learn that I am a vegan, the natural human response is to be defensive. This further leads to rationalization. People are unaware of tasty and healthy vegan dishes; they think veganism is all about eating Brussels' sprouts which is not true. Vegans eat everything that non-vegans do, only healthier and more environment-friendly. Most importantly, cruelty-free. It takes some time for people to understand this."



In India, because vegetarianism is largely due to religious affiliations, people find it difficult to accept the vegan lifestyle which has no such strictures behind it. For many there appears to be a challenge in accepting that people can individually make ethical choices without religion to back it up. Which is why the words of Manuj Chandra are relevant. Chandra - a young businessman, animal rights activist, co-founder of kranti.org and a vegan for the past five years, grew up in a Brahmin household. Encountering the practice of not eating meat at home but eating it outside made him think about the hypocrisy of religious practices. He became an atheist. "It is not important what you believe in, how you behave is more significant," he says passionately. Also author of an e book titled Shadow of Morality, a collection of quotations from personalities on compassion and animal rights, Chandra says we need to ask more questions of ourselves when it comes to how we live and what we eat.

Whether one accepts veganism or not, it is never a bad idea to open our minds to other ways of living. As in all other areas, with food too, a questioning outlook will make us more informed. We need to take a look at the food chain; where it comes from, how it's produced, and the impact of this on the source and on the environment.

Perhaps we also need to introspect a bit on why we are uncomfortable when it comes to a critical examination of what we eat. ⊕

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09 Apr 2010

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URL for this article

<http://bangalore.citizenmatters.in/articles/1922-vegan-group-bangalore>

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