

Deprived? Not the vegans

Sangeetha Devi Dundoo



On World Vegan Day, Hyderabad vegans articulate the benefits of their lifestyle

Today, on World Vegan Day, a spirited group of Hyderabad Vegans will march from 4.30 p.m. to 5.30 p.m., from People's Plaza, Necklace Road, to raise awareness towards veganism. A few years ago, veganism as a movement was almost unheard of in the city. The group is now a sizeable one and sees many new members in its fold.

For many members, veganism is a way of life. Some adopted the lifestyle as they learnt of the cruelty inflicted on animals for mass production of its products. Others turned vegan for health reasons and vouch they are stronger with a purely plant-based diet.

Sejal Parikh, now a vegan activist, recalls being reluctant. She was working as a human rights activist and felt she had enough on her plate to take up the cause of animals. Through her husband Pulkit, she learnt what cows were subjected to — injected with hormones and separated from their calves, and the cramped, dirty living conditions of chickens in poultry farms. "I was pursuing a fellowship programme in community health and work took me to Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Karnataka. What I witnessed made me feel that exploitation of animals is greater than that of humans," she says.

Armed with statistics on atrocities inflicted on animals, vegans argue that while many speak up against racism and sexism, they are oblivious to 'species-ism' or exploitation of one species by another. Sejal's husband Pulkit, a software engineer, feels, "What we are doing to animals is worse than human slavery. Imagine being given birth just to be enslaved and tortured for life." Vegans contend that it isn't enough to be a vegetarian and it helps to avoid all animal products. This means saying no to dairy, leather, fur, wool, silk, honey and not using cosmetics tested on animals. The transition, they insist, isn't tough.

"I thought I'd have to give up on sweets and ice creams. I didn't know of the alternatives. Today, there are plenty of choices. Home businesses have made it possible to source vegan milk, cheese, cakes and ice creams, if one isn't making them at home," says Sejal.

Hyderabad Vegans hosted the city's first vegan bazaar in February this year and followed it up with cooking demonstrations where participants learnt to make milk/cheese from soy, almonds, cashews, peanuts, rice and oats. Vegans occasionally meet over potluck meals. "Each time I see new converts," says Amita Desai of Goethe Zentrum. Amita's transformation happened because of her daughter, who felt strongly about animals almost a decade ago. "I read up and it dawned on me what we were doing to animals to meet our own comforts. As a mother, I could relate to the situation of a cow being subjected to inhuman situations to produce greater yield. Depriving a calf of its mother's milk is the worst form of torture," she says. A vegan for five years, Amita says she feels healthier and cites the example of Dr. Nandita Shah who has helped many reverse diabetes and blood pressure by adopting a vegan diet. Sejal was a vegan throughout her pregnancy and says she didn't need calcium supplements more than 15 days. One could argue that the consumption of cow's milk can be traced back to Indian mythology. Amita reasons, "Krishna or Gopala connected animals with nature. In rural situations, a cow's milk is used to feed only a small family, after the calf has had its share. Ghee and butter were earlier used sparingly. What we see now is commoditisation of animal products" For those sceptical about shunning milk products, vegans suggest reducing the consumption as much as possible, which in turn would contribute towards reducing the demand.

One step at a time

India has announced a ban on import of beauty products tested on animals, with effect November 13.

Vegan group

To know more about veganism lifestyle and plant-based alternatives, check <http://hyderabadvegans.wordpress.com/> and <https://www.facebook.com/groups/hyderabad.vegans>