

Healing the planet

Dr Nandita Shah will soon celebrate a decade of helping people reverse ill-health by urging them to choose a vegan diet

Even a brief encounter with Dr Nandita Shah can have a dramatic effect on your lifestyle choices and influence your beliefs about 'eating healthy'. The 55 year-old is an excellent ambassador when it comes to spreading the message of veganism and adopting a holistic and compassionate way of life. Dressed in a crisp black skirt and a white top, Dr Shah talks passionately about her journey towards becoming a vegan and her efforts in setting up SHARAN (Sanctuary for Health and Reconnection to Animals and Nature), which has helped around 4,000 individuals reverse ailments by correcting their lifestyle and diet since it was established almost a decade ago.

After spending many years in Canada, Dr Shah moved to Mumbai, where she ran a thriving homeopathy practice. "I chose homeopathy as it is all about treating patients holistically. The medications are specific to each individual, rather than diseases," she explains, adding that the idea of staying healthy by eating the right food has its roots in her childhood. "Nowadays, I am shocked at the kind of food mothers give their children. Luckily, I grew up with my mother insisting on nutritious, home-cooked meals. However, when my hectic lifestyle in Mumbai started taking a toll on my health, I decided to cut down my practice and moved to Auroville, Puducherry, in 1999."

Why Auroville? "I had been visiting Auroville for 10 years off and on," elaborates Dr Shah. "At that time, it was the only place in India that practiced natural farming. I had just read One Straw Revolution by Masanobu Fukuoka and was inspired by its ideas. I reckoned that it was easier to stay fit if we stayed closer to nature by growing plants the way they were intended to be grown and by eating what nature intended us to eat."

Her journey into veganism began when she learnt how cows were impregnated artificially so they could provide milk. "As my objective as a doctor was to reduce suffering, I was naturally inclined to stop eating dairy products. Since childhood, we live with the myth that we can be strong only if we drink three glasses of milk every day. The truth cannot be farther from that. Many cultures, like the Japanese, Chinese, Thai and Burmese, do not include dairy in their meal preferences," clarifies Dr Shah.

However, she admits, the change did not take place overnight and it was a process that happened over years. By 2002, she was a complete vegan, moving to a diet that was plant-based. By then, she had also gained another dimension of thought from her experience with homeopathy. "When I was a homeopathic doctor, I observed that patients often came back complaining about the same problem. This was an eye-opener, in that it was clear that we are still not tackling the root cause of the ailment."

Over the next few years, Dr Shah spent her time giving talks underlining the importance of holistic living. Her efforts were only moderately successful. "Although people were enthusiastic about it, they would still leave the seminar and drink a cup of tea or eat a bowl of ice-cream. I realised that people needed a lot more guidance on how to map the theory to everyday life, such as what to eat and what not to," she says.

Dr Shah's passion for health, environment and her compassion for animals converged when she started SHARAN in 2005. "Instinctively, humans are inclined to eat vegetables and fruits, but we have strayed too far away from that. If we manage to reconnect to our environment and eat right, not only is there a higher chance of reversing ailments, we also help preserve biodiversity as we keep animals safe," says Dr Shah, linking the three elements at the core of SHARAN.

Through SHARAN, she conducts training programmes such as 'Peas vs. Pills' and 'Reversing Diabetes'. "In the past 30 years, the number of diabetics has increased from 5 per cent to 35 per cent. Young children have thyroid, obesity and other hormonal ailments. Most of these 'metabolic syndromes' do not even exist in texts. Diseases have multiplied drastically, but the good news is that most of these can be reversed significantly by eating the right food."

The 'Reversing Diabetes' programme, which runs across 21 days in a sprawling resort in Gokarna, has received a phenomenal response. "Our participants come in totally unsuspecting and are initially in for a shock owing to all the dietary changes (not even black tea or coffee!). Some youngsters are so used to eating out all the time and consuming processed food that they are not even familiar with the names of many vegetables! Some, who come in with a cynical view, are completely transformed because they see the before-and-after lab results. However, in due course, they find it difficult to go back to the unhealthy stuff that they used to eat, because instinctively our body needs only the kind of wholesome food that we advise in our programme," she says with a smile.

One of the key attractions of Dr Shah's programme is the cooking classes that demonstrate how to cook strictly plant-based meals with less oil and no dairy and meat while still preparing nutritious and delicious food. There is also enough motivation to practice yoga, meditation, dance and nature walks.

Dr Shah shares some of her success stories, "Most of the (diabetic and thyroid) patients are on much-reduced medications by the end of our programme. Also, there are many examples of obesity control. The highest weight loss in our September programme was close to 9 kg. A lady who could not walk even a few steps managed to climb a flight of stairs on her own. And a young girl who initially claimed that the diet was too difficult to follow has already lost around 5 kg over the past month with the help of a strong support group."

SHARAN is gearing up to celebrate its 10th anniversary next year with a 10-day

workshop for therapists, lifestyle advisors and doctors who can lend support to its objectives. On her future plans, Dr Shah says, "The goal is to eventually reach a critical mass, when the need for our workshops will cease to exist! We would also love to come out with a book on the subject so we can connect with a wider audience."

Any tips and suggestions? "Eat only plants or mostly plants. Eat only whole or mostly whole food. Eat only organic. Eat only when you are hungry," she says.

The suggestions are powerful but how difficult are they to implement? "As a vegan, I certainly have challenges while travelling, but it's not impossible to follow. You learn to adapt and order the right items off a menu. It becomes a habit, just like being a vegetarian." What does she think of the criticism that organic food is expensive? "Well, how do so many boutiques exist when there are endless retail chains?" she retorts. "When you pay so much attention to the outside, isn't it important to take care of the inside? It all depends on where your priorities lie. Also, remember that processed food is more expensive than organic food," she points out.

If you're still not convinced, Dr Shah delivers a parting shot. "Imagine visiting an orchard; the natural senses of any person are immediately alerted to pluck the fruits and eat. But you are not overcome by that emotion when you visit a chicken farm. It's all about remaining honest to your basic instincts. Then your health is automatically restored."

— *Ramya Srinivasan*