

## Mini vegan messiahs

They have given up the delicious joys of childhood — ice-creams, pastries and milk chocolates — on their own and even persuade their peers to follow suit. Meet the animal-loving little vegans who won't even visit the zoo or play with a leather ball

**SHARMILA GANESAN-RAM TIMES NEWS NETWORK**

For those occupying goldclass seats in the matinee show of Despicable Me that day, it wasn't just the film that was funny, animated or multi-dimensional. As the title credits of the 3-D animation movie began to roll, this audience at a Bangalore multiplex saw a couple entering the overpriced section of the movie hall with two kids and later, behaving a bit like the impoverished do in Mumbai's first class compartments. The Anands took one look at the shiny, cozy, rich brown chairs that they had just coughed up nearly Rs 1000 for and then, casually plonked themselves on the carpeted floor instead. An acquaintance, who was seated nearby, tried not to raise his eyebrows as the respectable family of four watched the entire film from this unfavoured altitude. "Abhigya wanted to see the film but unfortunately, only gold class tickets were available for this show," revealed Annu Anand later, referring to her five-year-old son. "Since the couches were made of pure leather, he decided to sit on the floor instead," added Annu, and the family had followed suit. Just like they did, few years ago, when their son decided to shun all animal products and turn vegan.

A Youtube video that his mother had played one night, in which then three-year-old Abhigya saw undernourished cows being coaxed with chilli powder to produce more milk, fuelled his aversion towards cow milk. The Anands, who thought it was just an opportunistic excuse to avoid the drink he hates anyway, asked him whether he'd give up his favourite Kit Kats too. "When he realised these bars contained cow milk too, he resolved to avoid them as well," remembers Annu. His singular boycott of animal products soon infected both Annu and her husband, Anand. Annu, whose daughter is also a vegan, invariably flushes pink every time her son fights unreasonably with shopkeepers. When one of them handed Abhigya a lozenge called Honey Drop instead of change, the five-yearold barked, "How many bees have you gagged to make these?"

Spurred by forces such as disturbing visuals, animal-loving parents, or antidiabetes workshops attended by grandparents, a growing number of kids are veering towards the lifestyle that most non-vegans would consider, either "extreme" or, as language expert Karol Marocho has heard people say, "evangelistic". As part of this minority, which believes that a cow's milk is only meant for its calf and refuses anything that might involve even a hint of animal torture, vegan kids are willing to sacrifice the many simple pleasures of an average Indian childhood. They consciously don't succumb to the sensory assault of milk chocolates, ice-creams or jalebis, don't wear knitted sweaters and don't visit either the circus or the zoo. Of course, the fact that they've discovered gratifying substitutes in almond milk, soya milk, tofu and know that Oreo biscuits and Bournville chocolates are vegan, helps.

Gurgaon's Sonal, whose five-yearold twins Manan and Manaswi have been vegan since three years, says Manan makes it a point to check the ingredients of every food packet. Once, when he was at his grandmother's in Delhi NCR, he was offered a gulab jamun. "He was tempted by the smell, but when someone pointed out that it had ghee, he immediately refused to eat even a single bite," says Sonal, who often calls up party hosts in advance to inform them that her kids won't have any milk products. Social situations, of course, present many challenges to their controlled diet, but the kids manage. At eight-year-old Trishoola Latashankar's school in Delhi, when all the children sit and have lunch together, the rajma-lover asks, "Does it have any butter, ghee or paneer ?"

However, parents dread their children preaching in social settings. "Manan is so particular that he sometimes goes around telling friends what to eat and what not to. I discourage him from doing so, as people tend to assume that I'm feeding this kind of activism," says Sonal. Pondicherry's Archana Saraf, too, knows the feeling. When her daughters, 8-year-old Annora and 4-year-old Aanya, avoid milk sweets and cakes in parties, their friends start probing their respective parents. "Is milk really bad for us?" they ask. "That puts us in the spot sometimes," says Saraf, a foodie who dishes out a variety of tasty vegan substitutes, from vegan pastas to pastries, for her kids. Not long ago, her younger one picked up a betel leaf at a vegetable market in Pondicherry, rolled it to form an 'O' and declared: "There's my vegan taco."

Vegan parents regularly face flak from relatives and outsiders for denying their little ones milk. Bangalorebased Karol Marocho, whose two-yearold daughter Nikita has always been a lean child, was criticised by her in-laws for administering a vegan diet to her kid. "My father-in-law used to secretly feed her cow's milk till one day I found out," says Marocho, who has been raising her kid as a vegan for over a year now. "What's in the milk and how it reaches your door is scary," says Marocho, who attended a veganism workshop last year, adding that, "we are not evangelists trying to make people believe in god. These are facts."

Annu, who followed a vegan diet even during her second pregnancy in Canada, did not tell her in-laws that she had conceived till the eighth month. "They knew I was following a vegan diet, but they would've been very angry if they knew I was continuing with it through my pregnancy," says Annu, who knows that dairy, for most Indian parents, is a gastronomic expression of love and health. Of course, when Annu came down to India, not only were her in-laws cross with her but so were the doctors. "They refused to take on the responsibility of assisting me in delivery. It was when a doctor finally agreed, 'It was a safe delivery & with no milk & paneer in milk', reveals

Annu, who still breastfeeds her healthy one-and-a-half year old vegan daughter.

There are concerns over whether children bred on a vegan diet are getting wholesome nutrition. For those offering the shortage of proteins or B12 in a vegan diet as an argument, Marcho, who regularly makes sure that her kid consumes B12 tablets and channa, says, "Most vegetarians are B12 deficient. But veganism did not only increase Nikita's B12 quotient through supplements but also boosted her immunity, energy and vigour." Parents also say there is no point in imposing upon their kids. "No one learns by force," says Shankar Narayan, who often doles out advice on 'how to deal with non-vegans', to his son Sriram Chetan. "If you can't convince them, ignore," the Gandhian tells Sriram, a cricket fanatic who does not play with a leather ball. Will these kids stick to their diets when they grow up? Now that's a thought to chew on.

sharmila.ganesan@timesgroup.com



PALATE CONTROL: Annu Anand with her son Abhigya and daughter Abhidheya

