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IANS

## Move over milk, silk, leather - the Indian vegan's here!

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vegetable

New Delhi: At a swank coffee shop in a bustling south Delhi market, Sowmya Reddy, 27, orders a cappuccino and, oblivious to the bemused looks, hands over a soyamilk carton to the waiter. It's been seven years since she gave up cow's milk and all other animal products.

Sowmya is among a growing tribe of young vegans in India - a stricter form of vegetarianism that seeks to exclude the use of animal products for food, clothing and everything else.

So milk, butter, cheese, eggs, meat, honey and chocolates find themselves abandoned while soy milk, tofu and sorbet move up the menu charts.

Sowmya says there isn't a day when she doesn't get tempted to relax her self-imposed food curfew. 'But when I think what a poor animal has to go through to produce what is on my table, all those temptations subside,' Reddy said.

The reasons for turning vegan are often ethical - cruelty to animals or environmental commitment. If you are feeding 10 kg of grains to animals to get one kg of meat, it's unfair on the environment or sometimes health, believe vegans.

Veganism originated in Britain in the year 1944 when Donald Watson coined the word 'vegan' and also formed the Vegan Society.

India traditionally has a strong culture of vegetarianism - and now the number of vegans is growing.

Manish Jain, who runs an exclusive portal for vegans, says he has seen a surge in the number of vegan converts in the last four years. 'I get at least four to five calls a week from people inquiring about vegan recipes, diet...which is great because till a few years back the concept itself was alien to people,' said Indore-based Jain.

Hyderabad-based lawyer N.G. Jayasimha, 28, became a vegan 10 years ago after watching a cow that was being taken to the slaughter house because it had stopped producing milk. The images of the wailing animal stayed with him.

On the other hand, Mumbai-based Rita Vazrani, an ex-diabetic patient, took the plunge this May after attending a diabetes reversal programme.

'My life completely changed after I gave up milk products. My diabetes subsided. I am off any kind of medication. I have lost five kg...there is no end to the benefits,' Vazrani told IANS on phone.

Nandita Shah, a doctor who has been a vegan for a quarter of a century, said: 'Doctors worldwide have found that if we cut down animal products from our diet, then we also cut down our chances of getting hypertension, diabetes, cancer, kidney failure and other disease.'

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Critics argue that the vegan diet - without any milk - is capable of causing protein deficiency in humans.

But Shah said: 'If you are meeting your daily calorie requirements, then you cannot have any protein deficiency. I know vegan children and they are perfectly healthy.'

'In fact, the first time you give cow's milk to a baby - it spits it out, without exception.'

The route to this lifestyle, however, is full of potholes with constant temptations and distractions.

'The first few months after I took the plunge were extremely difficult. Every time I used to go out eating, it would take me hours instructing the waiter on how to prepare the food. Even then, sometimes my chapatis would land with a generous spread of butter,' said Bangalore-based Arvind, 32, who turned vegan five years ago.

Jayasimha, who works with the Humane Society International, gives a structured approach to the process of turning vegan. 'It's a three-step process.'

'The first step is to replace the items with its alternatives. Like paneer with tofu, leather with its cheaper lookalike - rexine and silk with rayon - again a replica of silk. If you can't find an alternative, then you shall try to reduce the consumption.'

'The third process is to refine the diet by avoiding products from the worst production systems like factory farming. If you can avoid eating eggs produced in factory farms where hens are trapped all their lives in an A4 size cage and are made to lay eggs 24/7 without any privacy, then you are saving her some torture,' Jayasimha said.

Of course, the philosophy still has many skeptics.

Quips Javed Azghar, a professor here, 'I would rather eat mutton for each day I live and die early than live in an abstemious world for 100 years!'

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*Posted by Adam Weissman on Sep 21,2010 00:52 AM*

Ending the use of animals for food and fiber makes sense for a range of ethical and environmental reasons, but we should be careful that we do not embrace alternatives that are no better. Rayon, for example, is derived from cellulose and is a major cause of deforestation in Indonesia, driving orangutans to extinction. Plastics are a product of the oil industry, one of the greatest drivers of environmental destruction on the planet. The whole world needs to shift towards reducing our overall consumption and reduce our need for stuff. Things we really do need should be created locally using locally available materials. Mechanized industry and global trade need to be recognized as obsolete in a world on the brink of climate catastrophe. We need to learn about usable wild plants and localized sustainable low-impact agriculture for our food and clothing.

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*Posted by chamundeswaric on Sep 20,2010 20:43 PM*

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