

Vegan for life!

Anuradha Varma | Aug 28, 2010, 12.00 AM IST



Fresh fruits (Getty Images)

Two leading ladies of the vegan movement exhort us to value life, not destroy it!

Actress and animal rights activist Amala makes her own vegan desserts and believes in beauty without cruelty

I turned vegan one-and-a-half years ago. It was during an inspection of slaughterhouses that I realised how animals were treated. Cows that should ideally live to 18 years are killed as they turn six, due to constant breeding and milking. Male cows are killed for veal.

The first week that I gave up milk, I realised I had been lactose intolerant without really knowing it. Like a lot of people, I had always felt uncomfortable without really knowing why. Initially, switching to soya milk had its own problems as very soon, I developed an allergy to it. Soya is fine as a bean. Now, I don't really use food substitutes so much as I think differently.

If I need milk with my breakfast porridge, I soak five to six almonds overnight and blend it for instant milk. This is also great for adrak ki chai. I avoid tea, though, for the tannin content. For desserts, I make my own. I chop bananas and freeze them for 48 hours, which changes the texture completely, and then I blend it with coconut milk and sprinkle nuts. I use figs and raisins for natural sugar. I learnt some of this at a homeopathy workshop that I attended.

My husband Nagarjuna and sons are non-vegetarian, and I don't impose my food choices on them. My husband tells me, however, that he feels inspired and will turn vegan one day, though he's not ready yet. I lead by example!

From telling me not to turn vegan — because I was being 'over-sensitive' or would suffer from lack of calcium — people have turned to appreciating what I eat. I often carry my own food wherever I go, but sometimes, friends make something specially vegan if they know I'm coming over. When I eat out, I like to take the chef into confidence and explain what I would eat, so that the next vegan who comes along will have an easier time. Eating out can be tough, especially Indian cuisine, which is rich in ghee, like dal makhni or naan.

As for calcium, I get more from sesame seeds than I would from milk. I also take a course in B12 vitamins for a month every year.

Veganism is a lifestyle choice, and I am vegetarian in my choice of clothes (I wear artificial 'sai' silk), shoes and make-up too. It's beauty without cruelty, all the way!

Make a difference, be vegan, says politician and activist Maneka Gandhi

Being vegan is not as much a food choice as a belief system. When you value life, you do not destroy it. I choose not to be part of any system that's based on violence, greed and exploitation. Just as I would not wear a bag made of a baby's skin or a coat of its hair, I would not use one made of a lamb or a calf or any other creature. Wouldn't that seem the natural choice of any reasonable person?

There is nothing difficult or different about being vegan. Indian food is essentially vegan. Our sabzis, rotis, dals, pickles, papads, salads are all free of animal ingredients. Drinking milk is not only unnecessary, it's unnatural. As with all animals, mother's milk is intended as a complete food for babies only until they sprout teeth. After that, milk cannot be digested as your body stops producing lactase, the enzyme needed to digest lactose.

Also, 17 per cent of the world's methane is produced by cows, who are forcibly bred to keep them lactating. This besides, milk production is immensely cruel with calves being killed so we can have their mothers' milk.

As for food substitutes, you don't substitute poison with anything. I eat and enjoy all kinds of food. All I'm giving up is cholesterol (no plant foods have any cholesterol), and the risk of bird flu, mad cow disease and all the many afflictions linked to meat and dairy.

All green leafy vegetables contain calcium. So do sesame seeds. Hummous is wonderful. In fact, the calcium in milk cannot be absorbed as it doesn't have phosphorus in the right ratio.

On an average, vegans live six to 10 years longer than meat-eaters. Studies show that vegetarian kids grow taller and have higher IQs than their classmates. At 6 feet, my son is possibly the tallest member of the family and he has a Mensa IQ.

Being vegan is such a natural part of who I am! Veganism is common parlance abroad. Things are changing. I expect that in the not too distant future eating animals will be considered as barbaric as we now consider cannibalism. Being vegan is the single most powerful way an individual can make a difference.

(As told to Anuradha Varma)

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