



Body | diet

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# Nothing that comes from a mother

**Sejal Parikh** shows us how and why we can lead a healthier and happier life without consuming anything that comes from a mother, anything that has a face

I had spent a good part of my career working for the telecom industry, when I realised that earning money was not the only way to contribute to a better world. I wanted to contribute to the betterment of the world, and make it livable for all. Two years ago, during the year of my extensive travel, I realised that I had to revisit my understanding of 'all.' During my stay in rural MP and Bihar, I saw the very people I was trying to work for, killing other innocent beings and animals. It made me

rethink my earlier ideas, and I decided to include animals as well into my definition of 'all.' I began opting for holistic methods of development, considering not just humans but also all living beings.

## What is a vegan diet?

At that time a friend (who also happens to be a doctor), introduced me to a vegan lifestyle – a compassionate, healthy, and cruelty-free living. Essentially, vegan (pronounced vee-gun) living refers to the choices that are made with compassion towards all living beings. It excludes all products derived from animals, namely,

milk and its byproducts, meat, fish, eggs, honey, wool, and leather. In simple terms, a vegan diet consists of 'nothing that comes from a mother, nothing that has a face.'

I had been culturally vegetarian, but after discovering the cruelty involved with meat and eggs, I consciously chose to be one. It was shocking to know how chickens were de-beaked, kept in horrendous conditions in poultry farms, or pigs were being treated mercilessly in pig farms. However, that did not prepare me for the cruelty involved in extracting milk. I have not been much of a milk drinker, but the idea of letting go of sweets, pastries, and ice-cream, seemed impossible at the time. I struggled to think of all possible arguments to refute the claims of cruelty involved. I also kept my eyes open during my further travels. To my disbelief, all the shocking videos seemed to show the truth! (One such video that everyone should see is Glass walls by PETA-India. It is freely available on YouTube.)

Until a breast-feeding session during my fellowship in community health, I did not know that breast milk in the female stops after some time. Hence, in the case of the cow, to get an unlimited supply of milk, she has to be forcefully impregnated multiple times, either through artificial insemination or by a common bull, in order to keep her pregnant, or lactating throughout, which also reduces her lifespan. She is also given hormones for increased milk production, which gives her

severe stomach cramps. Moreover, if she gives birth to a male calf, he is taken to the slaughterhouse (for beef or leather), whereas female calves are kept for milking again. I could not continue drinking milk products after knowing all these facts. Besides, there is one obvious reason for not drinking cow's milk, and I wonder why it never occurred to me. Cows give milk for their baby, the calf, and I am not a calf. No mammalian species in nature voluntarily drinks milk of another species.

### Vegan for better health

My husband and I gave up milk out of our compassion for helpless animals. Though I was convinced that I do not need cow's milk for my survival, I still believed that it was healthy for humans, so I began searching for nutritional replacement for the calcium and protein that cow's milk provided. It was only when I came across 'The China Study,' that I realised how wrong I had been. The China study is one of the rarest and the largest study on human nutrition, carried out in collaboration with the governments of US and China, and Oxford-Cornell universities. With a good deal of convincing data and research

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that spans around 35-40 years, it shows how cow's milk and animal protein is the primary cause behind so many lifestyle diseases that are rampant today. In fact, I now know of many people who have reversed their diabetes, heart disease, and hypertension just by eating a healthy vegan diet, thanks to the untiring efforts of doctors like Nandita Shah, John McDougall, Dean Ornish, Neal Bernard, and Caldwell Esselstyn. In fact, the former American President, Bill Clinton, in a CNN documentary, *The Last Heart Attack*, publicly acknowledged the benefits of his vegan diet in combatting his heart disease.

## We have been so conditioned to use milk products freely in diet that we have never given a thought to alternatives

I am questioned about my calcium intake by genuinely concerned friends the moment they discover about my vegan lifestyle. It is actually a myth that milk is the best source of calcium, as almost anyone with basic nutrition training knows because protein inhibits calcium absorption, and milk is too high in animal protein (casein which is also mucus-forming). In fact, many plant-based foods tend to have more calcium than milk and facilitate better absorption as well. The comparison below corroborates the point:

Calcium (mg) content in 100g of food items: sesame seeds - 1470; curry leaves - 830; fenugreek leaves (methi) - 395; ragi - 344; coriander - 184; horsegram - 287; kidney beans (rajma) - 260; almonds (badam) - 230; chickpeas (channa) - 202; cow's milk - only 120.

Moreover, I found numerous studies accumulated by the Physician's Committee for Responsible Medicine (PCRM) and other organisations on the linkage between dairy and higher osteoporosis, heart diseases, and prostate cancer.

The only nutrients that vegans need to worry about are Vitamin B12 and D. I go out a lot in the sun so my Vitamin D is adequate and I take regular supplements for Vitamin B12. Even non-vegans should have supplements of these vitamins, as deficiency in both these vitamins is very common today, because of our clean diet (Vitamin B12 is sourced from bacteria) and increasing pollution (which is blocking UV-B rays of the sun).

## Vegan made easy

The initial month was indeed a bit daunting, not because it is difficult to cook or live without milk products but because we have been so conditioned to use milk products that we have never given a thought to alternatives. However, with a few simple tricks, the transition became easy, and when we became complete vegans, we did not feel the need of dairy at all. A few simple changes such as replacing cow's milk with healthier plant-based milks (from coconut, cashew, soy, rice, almond, and oats), using tofu instead of paneer, cashew cream instead of dairy cream, helped quite a lot. I also developed a great interest in cooking after turning vegan, and can now veganise almost all traditional recipes. The sweets, ice-cream, and pastries that I was afraid to forego are back too. Those interested in easy transition to vegan diet can find some handy tips and a lot more at - <http://sejswirlpool.wordpress.com/why-am-i-a-vegan/vegan-transition-tips/>.

I am often asked if I care about the pain felt by plants. Even if we assume plants to be capable of perceiving pain, non-vegans still would kill/hurt more plants as farm animals do not drop from the sky but are bred/farmed using massive amounts of plant-based food and natural resources.

## Scope of veganism in India

Veganism in India is not a new concept. Many illustrious people have been practising and advocating naturopathy, shunning the use of animal milk in any form. Vegetarianism is well accepted throughout the country, and hence veganism is just a step further. Today, due to the tireless efforts of many passionate vegans, awareness about the new lifestyle is rapidly on the rise in almost all major cities like Mumbai, Pune, Chennai, Delhi/NCR, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Indore, Ahmedabad, Pune, and Pondicherry. Just a simple Facebook search would reveal many communities in these cities. SHARAN, an organisation promoting holistic, compassionate, and healthy living, arranges frequent workshops and cooking classes in different cities. Many Indian vegan enthusiasts have started sharing innovative and feasible recipes on their food-blogs. With all these support systems in place, it has never been easier to turn vegan.



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