

# Smile, but don't say cheese

How a smallish vegan community is trying to create thriving businesses in a dairy-obsessed India



## Shephali Bhatt

Samir Prasad's family has been vegetarian for the last two decades. About five years ago, when he was running his family juice bar in Mumbai, he attended a seminar on veganism organised by Dr Nandita Shah, a homeopath, that changed his life – it motivated him to turn vegan. So, apart from being a vegetarian, he now pledged never to consume animal products and by-products like milk, eggs, dairy products, honey, leather, fur, silk, wool, and even cosmetics derived from animal products. Why is his transformation from a vegetar-

ian to a vegan a bigger deal than a non-vegetarian turning vegetarian? Because he's the son of a milk-addicted nation, where asking someone to abstain from dairy products (unless medically advised) is sacrilege – the kind that would get mothers to dramatically cover their ears and say 'Nahin... kehdo yeh jhood hai' (Please tell me you're not serious).

It was a gentleman named Donald Watson who coined the term vegan to describe 'non-dairy vegetarians'. He also founded the first Vegan Society of the world in 1944. Vegans claim that their plant-based diet is not only good for their health but for the environment as well. And they have medical studies to corroborate their claims. Despite that, a large part of the world (and that comprises mostly of meat-lovers) alleges that veganism is nothing more than a fad. Only that this fad seems to be gaining popularity by the day.

Consider this: The population of the US, which is predominantly a meat-eating country, has over 7% vegans now and their number is increasing with the growing ilk of animal lovers, Al Gores, and plain health-conscious people. Back in India, however, the numbers are still minuscule. Dr Shah, who runs SHARAN foundation out of Au-

roville to spread the word of veganism, says it may be in the high thousands. And yet somehow, their small number doesn't seem to deter this community from building a vegan industry in India. Here are some of the more prominent businesses:

## The Vegan Dabbavallah

When Prasad turned vegan, he decided to emulate his life choice in his career as well. "After attending Dr Shah's seminar, I was certain I didn't want anything to do with dairy products now that I knew about their impact on our health and environment, and the cruelty animals were subjected to in the process of extracting them." Subsequently, in 2011, he started a vegan tiffin service in Mumbai called 'Vegan Bites', which delivers around 250 tiffin across the city every day. Last October they ventured into delivering vegan cakes, chocolates, and other desserts. Vegan Bites does business of over ₹2 crore in a year. That's pretty much the weekly turnover of Maggi from one suburban region within Mumbai, you'd contest. While that may be true, Prasad has plans of scaling up. "We've started making ice-cream under the Vegan Bites brand name and plan to convert it into an FMCG (fast-moving consumer goods) product that can be sold in supermarkets. The demand is huge," he says.

With an investment of ₹30 lakh at inception, Prasad boasts of seeing 35-40% profit growth year on year. Special meals for diabetic or heart patients and foreigners living in India are some of Vegan Bites' major attractions. "Actually, only 20-30% of my customers are vegans. The rest are health-conscious Mumbaikars," he shares. Prasad runs Vegan Bites with his



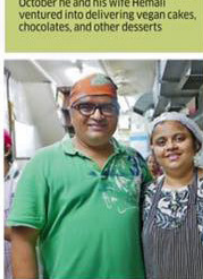
Marissa Bronfman, a Canadian with her own digital agency in India, runs a vegan snack delivery service in Mumbai called Bowl Bar. She's planning to set up a vegan cafe in the suburb of Bandra soon



Sushmitha Subbaraju who partnered Krishna Shastri, a social entrepreneur, in running Carrots, a wholly vegan restaurant in Bengaluru, was able to transform what started off as a niche restaurant in year one into a profitable venture towards the end of the second year



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wife Hemali who also turned vegan purely for health-related reasons after conceiving. "I've raised my kids on a vegan diet and I think that's the reason they have a high threshold for pain when they fall sick. And they've recovered without taking any medicines so far," she claims. Even if you leave aside the revenue they earn, they save a fortune on medical expenses!

**India's First Vegan Restaurant**  
Some 13 years ago when, inspired by one of her husband's friends, Sushmitha Subbaraju turned vegan, she wouldn't have imagined anyone else would give up on dairy. Yet, a decade later, she found herself partnering Krishna Shastri, a social entrepreneur, in running Carrots, a wholly vegan restaurant in Bengaluru. Last year, she took over the on-ground operations when Shastri moved to the US and into a more supervisory role. What started off as a niche restaurant in year one has become a profitable venture towards the end of the second year, she says. Weekdays have 20-30 customers a day on average. The number more than doubles on weekends with reservations.

queues and refusals. Even for Carrots, only a third of their customers are vegans. "We get great reviews for our food from non-vegetarians as well. People come to you when they realise a vegan diet is not a restricted diet. It just opens a whole new world of ingredients," she says. That should explain why they extended their two-page menu to 16 pages in two years.

**Screen For Vegan Ice-cream**  
If you've attended any metro vegan weddings recently (and yes, they are a thing now), you would've noticed a tub of ice-cream labelled 'White Cub' on the dinner menu. Manufactured in a unit in Gurgaon, White Cub is a "dairy-free" ice-cream certified by the FICCI Research and Analysis Centre, an autonomous body supported by the ministry of food processing industry, for its nutrition content. Founder Sonal started White Cub primarily

to feed her kids something "healthy and yummy". "Being an animal lover who had spent some time in London and attended vegan seminars, adopting veganism came naturally to me and my kids," she says. Navigating the Indian vegan market hasn't been easy for her, though. She went through a lengthy struggle trying to explain to the authorities that White Cub wasn't a frozen dessert but a dairy-free ice-cream – one that used coconut/almond milk instead of regular milk.

Pitching a 'PETA vegan food award' winner gluten-free ice-cream hasn't been easy for her back home where dairy is worshipped. "Sometimes, people think vegan means not tasty. They'll happily eat rajma chawal at home but steer clear of anything that comes with the vegan label," she says. Yet,

with word-of-mouth from family, friends, dieticians and doctors, White Cub has gained traction in the past three years. It's now available in 20 retail stores across the National Capital Region. Priced somewhere between Baskin Robbins and Mother's Dairy, it's a dessert that's not a deterrent to sales. "The food industry goes by the rule that you don't make something unless there's a demand. I believe demand gets created once your product is visible. Sooner or later, people start picking it up," she says.

**Shoes Vegans Can Use**  
"I'm sure you're familiar with the phrase 'Send retired horses to the glue factory'," says Manish Pareek, before he starts explaining how the glue used to stick different parts of a shoe together is made of horse fat. Pareek, who hails from a vegan family, has spent his childhood ruing the limited design options of non-leather shoes at Bata showrooms in his hometown Agra. It only made sense for him to start a vegan shoe factory on his own once he grew up. After extensively studying the various components that go into making shoes, he found their vegan alternatives and got them shipped from Korea. About two months ago, Pareek started a label called No Hide, a brand of vegan shoes that is currently available on Amazon and across several vegan fora in India. "I am yet to sort out the distribution channel but I'm constantly working on it. You'll see our shoes in Pantalooms' Pune store by next month," says a confident Pareek. With No Hide, he wants to achieve two objectives: besides the profit motive, he's aiming to save an animal life for every vegan shoe manufactured.



Priced in the range of ₹1,600 to ₹2,200, Pareek's shoes won't be marketed to vegans alone. "You can't create volumes that way," he says. Besides the vegan community, Pareek will also be targeting Jains and Marwaris, as well as vegans who work as a principal consultant for Gain Theory, a data-led wing within media agency GroupM, is looked up to in the vegan and animal lover circuit, says Pareek. Siva recently got



Rithika Ramesh runs a vegan bakery called The Green Stone in Mumbai. She often goes to pizza parlours and asks for a pizza without cheese. When they give her puzzled looks, she has that she's allergic. "It's better to not use the V word," she quips

married in a completely vegan, eco-friendly way. Four people turned vegan after attending the wedding, he tells us. As Dr Shah says: "People have been conditioned to consume dairy for so long; they will resist changing that habit initially. But take them through the dark side of consuming dairy and most importantly the benefits of a plant-based diet and they start showing signs of welcoming veganism soon enough."

## What's the Vegan Agenda?

The vegans we met while exploring this space didn't seem to have a strong agenda of mass conversion, really. "Take Harijan Prakesh", for instance. A central executive officer and a vegan-food photographer and blogger, she turned vegan eight years ago after attending an anti-smuggling workshop in the course of her work where she learnt how to check leather smuggling. "There I discovered that people dig nails in living baby crocodiles to get their hide for purses. I read up on leather and silk and that's how I turned vegan. My husband is non-vegetarian by the way, so I don't impose veganism on anyone," she highlights. It's just that the more people see the difference in their health after adopting a vegan lifestyle, the more they feel like talking about it to others, says Dr Shah.

A recent article in The Huffington Post said that the vegan market is exploding in countries like the US. This would explain why US dairies have started selling soy milk, and why some segments of the dairy industry have released ad campaigns attacking other types of milk. The vegans in India are too small in number to threaten our dairy industry, but if you add animal lovers and environmentalists to that, the number is not so insignificant after all. ■



Sneha Poojary, 29, has launched a line of vegan food for pets called Benevo, in India. While it's only been a few weeks, she's already got plenty of calls for vegan food for cats, of all the pets



to feed her kids something "healthy and yummy". "Being an animal lover who had spent some time in London and attended vegan seminars, adopting veganism came naturally to me and my kids," she says. Navigating the Indian vegan market hasn't been easy for her, though. She went through a lengthy struggle trying to explain to the authorities that White Cub wasn't a frozen dessert but a dairy-free ice-cream – one that used coconut/almond milk instead of regular milk.



Sonal started White Cub, a dairy-free ice-cream – one that uses coconut/almond milk instead of regular milk. It is now available in 20 retail stores across the NCR and Sonal sells close to 2,000 tubs a week