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Going off the milky way

More and more Indians are turning vegan. Some are even opening new businesses to help those who shun dairy products, reports **Varuna Verma**

The temple priest was surprised. It's not often that devotees refuse the curd-based *prasad* — but here was Ritika Ramesh turning it down. "I thought of the documentary on Indian dairy farms that I had seen, and my resolve doubled," says Ramesh, a 25-year-old assistant film director in Mumbai.

Ramesh is a vegan — an extreme vegetarian. She doesn't eat non-vegetarian food or dairy products. She has given away her Kanjeevaram silk saris — according to one estimate, about 5,000 silkworms are killed to make one heavy sari — and chic leather boots, produced with the hide of animals. And she buys only those cosmetics that do not contain milk, honey or lanolin.

Till some years ago, a vegan was something of an oddity in India; maybe because it challenged the basics of the country's dietary legacy — its obsession with milk and dairy products. "Being a vegan was a social inconvenience," says Manuj Chandra, founder, Kranti, an animal rights and pro-vegan organisation.

But now, more and more Indians are thinking before they eat. Chew on these numbers — five years ago, there were about 2,000 vegans in India. Today there are 20,000, according to the People for Ethical Treatment of Animals (Peta) India.

And that's not all. Vegans like Ramesh are turning their passions into vocations. She runs a vegan bakery, where she bakes special cakes, cookies and breads. "There is a growing demand for vegan food," she says.

Ramesh changed her food habits because she was an animal lover. She volunteered at an animal welfare body and fed stray dogs. Then last year she attended a documentary screening by the Sanctuary for Health and Reconnection to Animals and Nature (Sharan), a Puducherry-based pro-vegan group. "The film showed how cows are drugged and used as milk machines in dairy farms," she recalls.

Dilip Bafna has seen milk being weaned off many adult diets. If you visit Bangalore's Lalbagh garden on the second Sunday of a month, you'll find a feast in progress. About 70 people gather for a potluck lunch of salads, *samosas*, cakes and cookies. The lunch is a monthly meet of the Vegan Bengaluru Club. "We want people to know that veganism is not just about eating Brussels sprouts," says Bafna.

When Bafna started the vegan club two years ago, one person signed up. "Today, there are 70," says the animal rights activist who's been a vegan for the last 17 years.

A growing awareness about the environment and animal rights is turning young urban Indians into vegans. "The livestock industry is one of the top contributors to global warming. People are getting educated about the livestock-climate connection," says Chandra of Kranti.

Kranti — set up nine months ago — regularly holds seminars in colleges across India to educate the young on environment and animal abuse. "Since the youth are looking for an identity and a philosophy to adhere to, they are most open to adopting a vegan lifestyle," feels Chandra.

Peta India also holds screenings in schools and colleges of documentaries on atrocities on animals. "Last month, we screened an investigative documentary on the Indian dairy industry at Pune's Xavier's College. About 2,000 students saw the film. Many pledged to turn vegan," says Nikunj Sharma, senior campaigns co-ordinator, Peta India.

While the youth are saying no to cheese to save the eco-system, many older Indians are turning vegan for health reasons. "A vegan diet helps reverse diabetes, heart problems and asthma. Many middle-aged Indians are adopting it for health reasons," says Nandita Shah, founder, Sharan.

Sharan conducts a workshop — called Peas versus Pills — which expounds the health benefits of a vegan diet. "We have held 60 workshops so far. Many diabetics and heart

patients have adopted veganism," claims Shah.

The advocates argue that it's easier to be a vegan in India today than it was a decade ago. "The West has been catering to a vegan palate for a long time, with alternatives to meat, milk products and cosmetics. Now these products are available in India as well," says Rupa Shah, co-ordinator of the Mumbai Vegan group. She adds that in the last one year, three members of the group have started vegan food businesses in the city.

When a working vegan friend told Marisa Patel that she got up at the crack of dawn to prepare her packed lunch — when she would have rather slept — it gave Patel a business idea. The Mumbai-based housewife now provides packed lunch to 14 vegans across the city. "I also take catering orders for vegan parties," says Patel, a member of Mumbai Vegans.

In Delhi, Yasmin Jadwani is experimenting with making vegan sausages. From August this year, her company, Ahimsa Foods, will manufacture and sell vegan mock meat, kebabs, salami, sausages and meat curry. "This food makes the transition to veganism easier," she claims.

It's not just small entrepreneurs who are starting animal-friendly businesses. Big companies are also seeing the money in the vegan market. Bata now sells leather-free shoes, while Reebok and GoDesign offer leather-free wallets. Coffee chain Café Coffee Day has a vegan shake on its menu. Supermarket shelves are crowded with vegan chocolates and biscuits.

For the more indulgent, there are even vegan bubble baths. Cosmetic firm Lush has identified India as a growing market for its vegan products. "About 76 per cent of the products we sell in India — including face masks, soaps and bubble baths — are vegan," says Sangeeta Kamath, director, Lush India. The company has 12 stores across the country.

Vegan activism has also been growing in India. In Puducherry, Sharan trains entrepreneurs in starting vegan businesses and chefs in cooking vegan food. It holds workshops and seminars for environmental groups and veterinary doctors.

One of its important work areas is to tell people that vegans don't live a life deprived of good food. "We organise vegan paid dinners every month, which are attended by about 400 people," says Nandita Shah.

In Udupi, Karnataka, a vegan group — the Indian Vegan Society (IVS) — is using music to promote an animal cruelty-free lifestyle. For the last three years, it has been organising an annual International Vegan Festival, where vegan artists play music to spread the message of compassionate living. It also brings out a newsletter to help members with vegan marriages and vegan jobs.

As Shankar Narayan, founder, IVS, puts it, "We are promoting veganism as an animal-friendly lifestyle, and not just a food choice." And that, the activists will say, is the real milk of human kindness.

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