

Health without cruelty

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By Suma Varughese

Suma Varughese interviews Dr Nandita Shah, the dynamic founder of SHARAN, who is creating a wellness revolution through her whole plant-based diet



I first met Nandita Shah 10 years ago when a mutual friend of ours, Titoo Ahluwalia had invited both of us to his beautiful farmhouse in Nandgaon, about two hours from Mumbai. Nandita's passion for animals and for a cruelty-free diet was very visible, and she shook her head regretfully when Titoo, himself a convinced vegan, told her that he had decided to have fish because veganism caused him to lose too much weight and made him a difficult dinner guest. "You shouldn't have," she said. I lost touch with her for a few years, but did take note of her starting an organization called SHARAN which

stands for Sanctuary of Health and Reconnection with Animals and Nature. I was also aware that she was holding seminars catchily titled 'From Pills to Peas'. But I first sat up and took notice when she started holding the 21-day Disease Reversal Programmes and word began to spread about the number of people who had healed from diabetes. Thereafter, SHARAN and Nandita become increasingly in the news as more and more people began to promote her and her many seminars and programmes. A revolution was happening and she was at the centre of it. A vegan revolution and a healing revolution. Her mission, she says, is to eradicate diabetes from India, and who knows, that may yet happen. A former homeopath, Nandita lives in Auroville, Pondicherry. She has a tiny pad in Mumbai too, where I went to meet and interview her. Unpretentious and down to earth, it is clear that SHARAN is a labour of love, and that commercial considerations are irrelevant. Excerpts from the interview.

What would you say is the impact of SHARAN? What are the stats?

We have touched approx 31,000 people who may have attended a talk, a programme or a cooking class. Of these about 5,000 to 6,000 would have attended a full-fledged programme.

Of these people, how many have healed from their issues?

That is not easy to say because not everyone gets back to us. When they do write to me, I put it into a folder. I have about 500 cases of cure. I am sure many, many more have improved. People call back, tell you on facebook, but they may not have written. More than 3,000 would have healed significantly. We have many who have reversed their diabetes, which is our main seminar. But this apart, weight loss, asthma gone, eczema gone, heart disease gone, as also blockages, strokes, cancer, and incurable diseases. All these are up on our website also. Even psychological diseases like bipolar disorders have gone.

Simply through shifting to a plant-based diet?

Not only through that. The person I am taking about. His blood sugar was not controlled, even with medications. By changing his diet, within two weeks his blood sugar became normal, and then over a longer period of time, he was able to stop all medication. He had very severe bipolar, so much so that he

was never left alone. He would turn on the stove, leave the house, get on a train and go to another city. He had never taken medicines for bipolar. However, when he went off the diabetes medicine, he healed from his bipolar. Which means that the cause of his bipolar may have been the diabetes medicines. This process took several years and by no means was immediate. And today we have several people who have reversed their depression and anxiety simply by changing their diets, and going off the medicine.

Can these drugs really cause mental disorders?

Diabetes and blood pressure can both cause depression. And today about 35 per cent of the adult Indian population are diabetic. I believe a lot more people may be on drugs for depression. Nobody talks about it. If I were to hold a seminar on reversing depression, nobody would come. If I were to have one on reversing impotency, no one would come, due to the shame related to these diseases. But so many people have healed from these problems by making dietary changes.

Is impotency also caused by medicines?

No, impotency is caused by diabetes and high blood pressure.

What is your take on health?

Our body is always working to heal itself. Most of the time, we ourselves are getting in the way. Our body produces symptoms to tell us something is wrong and that we should change something. Instead of listening to our body, we listen to doctors. Taking medicine is actually like saying shut up to your body. Everyone knows that our bodies can heal and that it takes time. If you get a fracture, you know that you have to allow the body to heal. But when we have an illness, just because we have drugs that can get rid of the symptoms, we say shut up to the body. Then we get chronic ailments. Most of the diseases we get today are preventable, yet people are going to hospitals ever more than before. I see 25-year-olds going for dialysis, 30-year-olds going for kidney transplant. These serious interventions are not to be taken lightly. For a bypass, you have to cut through the sternum to reach the heart. Yet it is being done left, right and centre.

What is your prescription for healing?

In order to heal any disease we have to remove their cause. All diabetics are given the same prescription of medicines, insulin, and a no-carbs diet. And no one gets better. And still we go to the doctor. Everyone knows that medicines do not cure diabetes.

If you want to reverse a disease, understand the cause. The cause of diabetes is not sugar. High blood sugar is the result of diabetes. The cause of diabetes is insulin resistance or lack of insulin. So we have to inquire how did lack of insulin occur. That means the cure of any disease is not through the medicine. Honestly, the cure is so simple people don't notice it. If you have a car that runs on petrol, you won't give it any other fuel, will you? If you have a lion you will feed him only meat. If you have a cow you will feed her only grass. The lion already knows what it should eat and so does the cow. Are we born with less instinct? Let me put you in touch with your instinct. If you were to see fruits and vegetables hanging from a tree, what would you feel like doing? Plucking and eating them, right? If you saw a chicken or a goat walking, does your mouth water?

No, but if you see it cooked, your mouth will.

That is because of conditioning. Every child resists drinking milk. That is why the market is filled with additives like Bournvita or Complan. Every mammal produces milk only for their young. And we are not calves. We are eating food that is not suitable to our instincts. Vegetarians and non vegetarians get the same diseases. That is because milk and meat have the same composition. Both are high protein, high fat and no

fibre. If we want to get rid of these diseases, both vegetarians and non vegetarians will have to change what they eat, by letting go of all animal products including milk and milk products.

What about the mental and emotional causes of illness? Why are you not taking that into account?

When we get stressed we produce adrenaline. When animals are stressed they produce adrenalin. When calves are taken away from their mothers, the cows cry for days. That causes a lot of adrenalin to be in the milk. This inadvertently causes stress in the consumer. Within two months of delivery, the cow is artificially inseminated, which adds to the hormone in the milk. Thyroid, polycystic ovaries, diabetes, infertility are all a result of taking hormones. Why is all that happening? Because of the food.

Are you saying that vegans do not suffer from any stress?

Let me share my own journey. In the beginning, I didn't realise that there was a change in my state of mind until I was invited to a conference in Spain. The only vegan food I found was French fries, which came with ketchup and mayonnaise which contains just a drop of egg. Since I did not have a choice, I had the French fries and went to sleep. I woke up with stress. I recognised this stress as something I had always experienced, but had not felt it in the recent past. I realised that after turning vegan it had left me.

So do you feel that you are in a state of equanimity, and never lose your cool?

I don't say that. I don't say that I am never stressed. But I see a lot of people who are a lot more stressed than me. I have a lot of people tell me how do you manage all this with so much patience and so much calm. I know that I was not like this before.

I am friends with a doctor couple in Germany, who became vegans. After six months, along came Christmas, and they tried some chocolates. One of them said, "I had one chocolate and I got my depression back."

When did you become a vegan?

I became a vegan in 1985. But I wasn't a 100 per cent vegan. I didn't have dairy, but if someone had cooked in butter or ghee, or if something was made in curds, I had it. One day, someone gifted me butter toffees and I offered it to a friend who refused it because he was a vegan. That's when I got it. And I never wanted to go back, because the changes were huge. I was less heavy. The occasional colds and coughs disappeared. It was like fog clearing up. Your brain becomes very sharp. It is only when you go to 100 per cent that these kinds of changes show up.

How did you make the connection that animal products are the cause of disease?

Partly from how I felt myself. Secondly, I could see that the countries that consumed the most animal products suffered from the most osteoporosis. In my very early practice in India I saw only a few patients with osteoporosis but when I went abroad, so many patients with osteoporosis. At that time, in Mumbai, people did not have cheese or paneer. And one ounce of cheese is equal to 16 ounces of milk, while paneer is 12 ounces of milk!

Osteoporosis enabled me to make the connection. I also read a lot. Dean Ornish's book, *Reversing Heart Disease* also influenced me.



Nandita teaching students how to make delicious whole plant-based food

We humans are the only species that makes food less nutritious by refining it. I hold these 21-day residential course, and before they start, we ask them to take all the important lab tests. Thereafter, my job is to just take them off the medicine as they get better.

One person had just got diabetes. When you just get diabetes it is like a life sentence. You are ready to do anything. This woman had very high blood sugar. She had to be given 40 units of insulin a day. By the end of the 21-day course, her diabetes had totally disappeared. We have had people who have had diabetes for 30 years, thyroid, obesity, acidity. I have seen people who take 16 tablets a day come down to four in just 21 days!

How many actually stick to the diet, because it is not easy?

We are creatures of habit, but once we accept a certain diet, it is easy. I have travelled all over the world, and no matter where I went, I got vegetarian food or vegan food because that's what I was looking for and asked for. Fruits, veggies, nuts and grains are everywhere.

What exactly do you mean by a plant-based diet?

I am talking about a whole-plant based diet. That means all whole foods, no refined products, everything organic, no peeling vegetables. We want to keep all the fibre. We allow grains but we create awareness. We Indians follow a grain-based diet. In the North, it is roti and in the South, you see people eat mounds of rice with small katoris of vegetables. Only one fourth of your plate should be grain. The rest should be veggies and beans.

What about cooking? Are you okay with it, because one gets the idea that vegans are against cooked food?

Raw is much better, but we advocate it at stage three of our programme. We are not there yet.

According to ayurveda there are certain types of people like those with Vata constitutency who cannot digest raw food. I am a Vata and I cannot digest raw food.

You know when you are on a homeopathic or ayurvedic diet, you never get well. You keep taking medicines.

Are you saying that veganism completely reverses all ailments?

I know many doctors and alternative speacialists today who have diabetes. In our first diabetes reversal programme we had four yoga teachers and two people who were running 10 km a day. Exercise is essential but it does not cure anyone of diabetes. Nor does the medicine.

No vegans have diabetes?

I make a distinction. Potato chips and coke are vegan. I advocate a whole plant-based diet.

Sometimes vegans are extreme and make people wrong. They make non-vegetarians feel guilty.

Very true. They forget that they were in the same place one time. In my seminars, I tell people. Don't try to convert people. Because if you do that, they will do the exact opposite thing. I just say, be an inspiration. You make the change, you get the results and wait for them to ask you. On the other hand, I don't feel that vegan diet is extreme. I feel that bariatric surgery is extreme!