The rise of the vegans

Jayanthi Somasundaram

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Jayanthi Somasundaram meets a few city-based vegans and finds out their cuisine can be exciting, explorative and comforting

Coconut milk-based coffee? The thought leaves you blank.

We are a breed that wakes up to the aroma of steamy, frothy filter coffee made with cow's milk. The tank loads of milk reach the city at 4 a.m. every single day, so, when you are handed a vegan style coffee in a steel *dabara* and tumbler, you do pause a tad longer than necessary. Surprisingly, it looks and tastes pretty much like latte.

"Well, I use soy milk for filter coffee and tea," says Vimala Ramani, 66, a homemaker who turned vegan two years ago. "I also make curd with soy milk and it tastes good!" she assures. "The first week was very difficult, because being a 'Tambrahm', I needed my cup of milk and curd," she recollects, but adds that a typical South Indian diet is pretty much vegan, minus the dairy. Known for her culinary expertise among city-based food groups online and offline, Vimala explains how she now uses soymilk to make her avials and morkuzhambus. "People who have tried my dishes have no complaints," she says. She recollects that initially it was "weird", but in two days time she was enjoying her cup of soy milk filter coffee.

Chennai is by far the friendliest city for vegans, according to city-bred Mihir M. Shah. A gemmologist and diamond grader, he says that veganism and its ideals have always been on his mind, though it took a while for him to plunge into it. "It simply meant giving up all my favourite food," he begins. In the past two years and four months since he changed his diet and lifestyle, finding replacements was his biggest challenge in the initial few weeks. With the advent of soy milk and dairy re-placers, the challenges are more or less sorted out. Sambar, rasam, idli, dosa are all vegan-friendly food he stresses; however, in Delhi, the options are limited, because it is a city soaked in paranthas, paneer and lassi." Mihir claims that the most unique vegan food that he's tried is the vegan cheese. "My cousin got it from England; it's mozzarella-flavoured cheese made from soy. The texture and taste is just like regular cheese," he explains and says people going overseas shop for it in particular.

When she travels, Vimala Ramani ensures she has her tetra pack of soy milk in her bag. She says that she still eats her favourite sweets even after turning vegan and adds, "I just ensure that the dessert is made without milk, butter, ghee or khoya."

Turning vegan automatically eliminates unhealthy food choices, explains Meera Maran, creator of the brand Terra. Banning all artificial creams, processed items and milk and butter, Meera says that there are challenges when creating deserts. "We use coconut milk, protein-rich almond milk, Omega -3 rich walnut milk, and even make our own rice milk for baking. These are very good milk substitutes that we use for cakes, milk shakes, ice creams, Indian sweets and breads."

"Our vegan kaju katli, which is one of our bestsellers, is made only with organic cashews and organic *panankalkandu* (palm crystals)," she explains and adds that the Banana-Coconut Milk Smoothie made with organic red bananas and fresh organic coconut milk is also a favourite amongst her clients.

Is a vegan diet expensive? "We can look at it this way, you will be eliminating many options and replacing them with another option. So, it does not necessarily have to be expensive, but at times the ingredients may be difficult to procure," says Meera.

Dr. Nandita, founder of Sharan who guides people to choose a whole food plant-based diet, agrees that a vegan diet need not be expensive. "For example, a typical South Indian diet of tiffin in the morning, meals in the afternoon and tiffin in the evening is vegan, minus the curds and buttermilk. That's not expensive," she points out.

Over the years, Dr. Nandita has answered several interesting queries and misinterpretations that people have about veganism: "A majority of people ask how they will get their proteins and calcium; some even explain to me that cows are treated well in India and the most common reaction I get is that Indians have been consuming milk for generations and now you are telling us this." She however says that many people are increasingly open to the whole idea of veganism and healthy living — eliminating not only animal products from their diet but also from their lifestyle. The vegan movement in Chennai is slow, but it is definitely throwing light on a healthier lifestyle. Like, most households, they ensure they have their share of 'sweet, karam and coffee'.