

How Indian Vegetarianism Disrupted the Way the World Eats

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One of the most dramatic gastronomical changes in the 21st century has been the worldwide surge in vegetarianism (and, more recently, veganism). An estimated 500 million people globally now follow a vegetarian diet. While the largest number is in India, vegetarians account for 10% to 14% of the populations of Australia, Israel, New Zealand, Sweden, Switzerland and Taiwan. *The Economist* declared 2019 as the year that veganism goes mainstream, noting that as many as 15% of Americans declare themselves vegetarian or vegan, while many more are reducing their meat consumption (Capiello, 2018). In the US sales of plant-based foods increased 31% in the past three years. This movement is driven by several factors, including concern for the environment and global warming (animal agriculture accounts for 13%–18% of greenhouse gas emissions; (FAO, n.d.), health concerns, and animal rights.

Although the first two are contemporary concerns, the concept of vegetarianism originated in India thousands of years ago and started influencing dietary practices in the Western World as early as the 4th century BCE. Greek travelers extolled the austere lifestyles and good health of the ascetics they met in India. The Greeks had their own, possibly related, tradition of vegetarianism, called Pythagorean, which influenced early Christian thought.

Vegetarianism in India

The ancient Indians were meat eaters. Their religion centered on the sacrifice of animals and consumption of their flesh. The sacrifices were administered by the Brahmin priests. Still, there is evidence that the seeds of vegetarianism may have been sown during the Vedic period (1700–1100 BCE), since occasionally a figure made of flour was substituted for the animal victim (Sen, 2015, pp.36–37).

Between the 8th and 6th centuries BCE new attitudes and customs emerged that would become central to Indian culture. One new concept was *samsara* – the idea that the self (*atman*) is faced with an endless cycle of rebirths; that what we become is determined by our actions (*karma*); and that one way of release from the endless cycle of rebirth was by withdrawing from society and renouncing the world in order to lead a virtuous life (Sen, 2015, pp.50–51).

While *The Upanishads* did not overtly advocate vegetarianism, compassion for all living beings (*ahimsa*) tops the list of the virtues to be cultivated. Some renouncers moved to forest retreats where they would eat fruits that had fallen or food that was wild and uncultivated. The abundance of vegetation in India clearly favoured this kind of diet. (It's difficult to imagine vegetarianism emerging in a

much colder climate.) Some ascetics attracted followers who formed small groups that became orders or congregations. While some disappeared, two survived to become major religions: Jainism and Buddhism.

The founder of Jainism Vardhaman Mahavira (599–527 BCE), was the son of the ruler of a small kingdom in northeast India (Sen, 2015, pp.52–54). He left his home and family in search of enlightenment and gained followers. A central doctrine of Jainism is that all nature is alive. Everything, from rocks and plants to gods, has an eternal soul, or *jiva*, although some souls are more powerful and complex than others. Related to this is *ahimsa*: Mahavira's 'pure unchanging eternal law' was that 'all things breathing, all things existing, all things living, all things whatever, should not be slain or treated with violence'. Five things are absolutely forbidden to Jains: meat and meat products, fish, eggs, alcohol, and honeys. Jain Monks and nuns follow even more stringent rules, avoiding fruits and vegetables with seeds or those that grow underground, fermented foods, and buds and sprouts. However, most Jains are not vegans and consume dairy products.

Today, there are only around 4 million Jains in India, mainly in the state of Gujarat and in the Indian diaspora. But elements of their philosophy and practices were absorbed into mainstream religious practices of what later came to be called Hinduism and had a powerful influence on the man who became the world's most famous vegetarian: Mahatma Gandhi.

Another movement was Buddhism (Sen, 2015, pp.55–57). Siddhartha Gautama (563–483 BCE or c. 483/400 BCE), later known as the Buddha ('enlightened one'), was the son of the ruler of a small kingdom in what is now Nepal. At one point, Gautama joined the ascetics where he practiced austerities and almost starved to death. He rejected this approach in favor of what he called the Middle Way – a path of moderation between the extremes of self-indulgence and self-mortification. The concept of *ahimsa* is also central to Buddhist doctrine, although it was not taken to the extremes of Jainism. Gautama Buddha also accepted the idea of *karma*. The ultimate goal is to attain nirvana, freedom from the cycle of births.

Early Buddhism placed no restrictions on the diets of laymen, though the Buddha urged moderation in order to avoid excessive attachment to the pleasures of the table. The food served at Buddhist monasteries was vegetarian. Outside the monasteries, where Buddhist monks begged for their food, they had to accept anything that was given to them, even meat or fish, provided it was not slain on purpose for the monk and the recipient did not see, hear or

even suspect the killing of the animal, this being the responsibility of the person who gave the food. Only a few substances were absolutely forbidden to all Buddhists, including alcohol.

A major supporter of Buddhism and Jainism was the Maurya emperor Ashoka (304–232 BCE), considered one of India's greatest rulers (Sen, 2015, pp.57–58). He expounded his moral code called *dhamma* in inscriptions on rock surfaces or sandstone pillars throughout the Subcontinent. Asoka was especially concerned about the wellbeing of animals. He gave up the consumption of meat at his own court, banned the sacrifice at certain locations, and set up hospitals for animals. Nearly two thousand years later the Moghul emperor Akbar (1542–1605) adopted a similar stance by becoming a virtual vegetarian. In India, food and politics are closely linked.

Many people found the moral and ethical teachings of the new movements an attractive alternative to the esoteric and expensive rituals of the Brahmins. Both religions welcomed women and members of oppressed castes. As a result, the Brahmins co-opted the idea of vegetarianism and became vegetarians themselves. Vegetarianism also became a marker of status: People who wanted to move up the social scale adopted a vegetarian diet.

Traders, monks and missionaries spread Buddhism throughout the region, and today it is the dominant religion in much of Southeast Asia and to a lesser degree in Korea, Japan and China. As it split into various sects, the propriety of eating meat became a subject of doctrinal dispute. Today in Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka, monks eat meat if it is given to them, whereas in China, Korea and Vietnam, they are generally strictly vegetarian. In Tibet, a cold country where vegetables are scarce, vegetarianism is rare and even the Dalai Lama eats meat (Sen, 2015, p.56).

Vegetarianism and the Greeks

In 326 BCE, Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE) invaded India, lured by tales of its fabulous wealth. He soon departed but left behind his generals, who founded Indo-Greek states in the Northwest. Even before his invasion, there were trade and cultural contacts between classical Greece and India. The Greeks were impressed by the intelligence and austere lifestyles of what they called gymnosophists ('naked philosophers') – Jains and other ascetics. The Greek ambassador Megasthenes (ca. 350–290 BCE) extolled the country's prosperity and the attractive, healthy appearance of the inhabitants. Megasthenes noted that the Indians lived frugally, never drank wine except at sacrifices and ate mainly a mixture of rice and a thick stew (Sen, 2015, pp.59–62).

The Greeks had their own vegetarian tradition, called Pythagorean after the Greek philosopher Pythagoras (c. 570–495 BCE), who lived around the same time as Mahavira and the Buddha. Despite differences in Greek and Indian philosophical and moral systems, Pythagoras also concluded it was wrong to eat animals. One reason was

a belief in metempsychosis – that human souls were reborn into other animals after death. Whether Pythagoras was influenced by Indian ideas is what one writer called 'one of the great unsolved mysteries of world religion' (Stuart, 2006, p.41). Until the early 19th century, European vegetarians were often known as Pythagoreans.

Vegetarianism and Christianity

In his treatise *On Abstinence from Animal Food*, the philosopher Porphyry (234–305 CE), a follower of Pythagoras, praised the Brahmins for living on the natural products of the earth. St. Clement of Alexandria (150–215 CE) also advocated a vegetarian diet, citing the Indian gymnosophists who 'feed on nuts and drink water'. St. Jerome (347–420 CE) defended vegetarianism and said that by showing the spiritual benefits of fasting Indian Brahmins should be emulated by Christians. According to Tristram Stuart, 'this ringing endorsement by one of the most revered church fathers inspired Christian vegetarianism for centuries' (Stuart, 2006, p.43). St. Benedict, founder of the Benedictine order, laid down the rule that no four-footed animals should be eaten in monasteries. Today this tradition and even strict vegetarianism is still followed in some Western monastic orders.

But the ecclesiastical powers-that-be also condemned vegetarianism as a heresy, citing biblical passages that God made animals for man's use. St Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) argued that animals had no rational souls and were a matter of indifference to humans. Saint Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274) declared that 'it matters not how man behaves to animals because God has subjected all things to man's power' (Spencer, 1995, p.106). Medieval sects such as the Cathars who were vegetarians were declared heretics and persecuted by the Inquisition.

Vegetarianism and Europe

Throughout the Middle Ages and Renaissance period Europeans' interest in Indians and their vegetarian lifestyle was stimulated by the tales of European travelers to India. Marco Polo (1254–1324) wrote that the Indians he met were virtuous, honest, bathed regularly (unlike Europeans) and led long and healthy lives because they didn't kill any living being 'neither fly nor flea in the world [...] because they say that they have souls' (Stuart, 2006, p.44). Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), who read extensively about India, condemned cruelty to animals and followed a vegetarian diet.

An influential European proponent of vegetarianism was Thomas Tryon (1634–1703), who formed a group of 'Hindu vegetarians' and wrote many self-help books, including *The Way to Health*, promoting a vegetarian diet and abstinence from tobacco and alcohol. He linked European's treatment of animals to their degradation of the natural world, including urban pollution and poisoned rivers. His writings encouraged Benjamin Franklin to

become a vegetarian, at least for a while. Some theologians tried to reconcile Christianity with what they observed in India by seeing it as a link to the Garden of Eden where Adam and Eve lived as vegetarians until the Fall (Stuart, 2006, pp.60–77).

A more notorious advocate of vegetarianism was John Oswald who became enthralled with Indian culture when he served as a soldier in India. Although a professed atheist, he adopted vegetarianism as part of his anti-establishment political agenda, uniting radical politics with animal rights. In his book *The Cry of Nature or an Appeal to Mercy and Justice on Behalf of the Persecuted Animals*, he wrote that man is instinctively compassionate and that if he had to personally experience the death of the animals he ate, a vegetarian diet would be far more common (Stuart, 2006, pp.295–313). The Orientalist Sir William Jones (1746–94), who first noticed the similarity between Sanskrit and Indian languages, tried to reconcile Christian scriptures with Hinduism by claiming that the doctrine of ahimsa had its roots in the laws of Noah.

The rise of Deism – the belief in the existence of a supreme being who does not intervene in the universe – led to scepticism about the tenets of Christianity, making vegetarianism popular among European intellectuals. Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–78) argued that humans are not naturally carnivorous and praised the virtues of a simple natural diet. The heroine Julie of his novel *The New Heloise* ‘liked neither meat nor stews nor salt’. Rousseau’s friend and follower, the French writer Jacques-Henri de Saint Pierre (1737–1814) praised a vegetarian diet in his works. He wrote:

It is from [India] that our arts, sciences, laws, games and religions originated. It is there that Pythagoras, the father of philosophy, went to search among the wise Brachmanes [Brahmins] the elements of physicians and morality. It is from there that he brought back to Europe the vegetable regimen which carries his name and which causes health, beauty, and life to flourish [...] (Stuart, 2006, p.211).

Voltaire (1694–1778) extolled the Brahmins as enlightened advocates of a natural diet; in one of his stories, the hero eats a meal of 1000 delicious dishes with no meat. Some proponents of the French revolution advocated a meat-free diet as a sign of egalitarianism. Physicians of the time preached the health benefits of avoiding meat, citing the traditional claim that the Brahmins had the greatest longevity.

Throughout the 18th century a steady stream of figures advocated vegetarianism. The poet Percy Bysshe Shelley (1782–1822), who was familiar with writings about India, converted to vegetarianism and argued for a vegetarian revolution in his *Vindication of Natural Diet* – a work that was admired by Mahatma Gandhi and inspired George Bernard Shaw, among others.

In 1843 the British and Foreign Society for the Promotion of Humanity and Abstinence from Animal Food was founded, followed four years later by the Vegetarian Society, the main British organization for vegetarians today. By the mid 19th century, vegetarianism had become a national movement in the U.K. *The Vegetarian* newspaper was started in 1888.

By far the most influential vegetarian of the time was Henry Salt (1851–1939), a social reformer who was born in India. He wrote almost 40 books, among them *A Plea for Vegetarianism* (1888), *The Humanities of Diet* (1897) and *Animals’ Rights* (1892). Salt was a champion of Thoreau in England and an inspiration for Mohandas (Mahatma) Gandhi.

Another group that promoted vegetarianism was the Theosophical Society, whose beliefs combined elements of Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity. Founded in New York City in 1875, they moved their headquarters to Madras, India, a few years later. The movement’s leader Annie Besant and many of her followers supported both vegetarianism and Indian Independence from Britain. In India, religion came to be considered not the only basis for adopting a vegetarian diet, as authors turned to Western sources to justify it on health and ecological grounds (Hauser, 2007).

Gandhi and Vegetarianism

Gandhi was born into a Hindu family on the coast of Gujarat, a region with a strong Jain presence (Sen, 2015, pp.231–237). His family was vegetarian and his pious mother often fasted. When Gandhi was a teenager, a friend persuaded him to try meat. At the time there was a popular belief that the British owed their strength and dominance to their consumption of meat and that if Indians followed suit, they could defeat the British and win independence. Even the great spiritual leader Swami Vivekananda urged the eating of meat on the grounds that it was the only way to achieve robust health and prevent the abject surrender of the weak to physically stronger people.

In his autobiography *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* (originally published in 1927), Gandhi described the results of his first foray into meat eating, ‘I had a very bad night afterwards. A horrible nightmare haunted me. Every time I dropped off to sleep it would seem as though a live goat were bleating inside me, and I would jump up full of remorse. But then I would remind myself that meat-eating was a duty, and so become more cheerful’. (Gandhi, Pt.I, Ch.17).

Gandhi eventually overcame his reluctance (and his compassion for goats) and began to enjoy eating meat. But after a year he was overcome with guilt and concluded that lying to his parents was worse than not eating meat. He decided that as long as they were alive, meat eating was out of the question.

In 1888 Gandhi left for England to study law. His mother made him swear a vow that he would never touch meat, alcohol or women. Initially he subsisted on a diet of boiled vegetables and bread until he discovered a vegetarian

restaurant in London where he bought a copy of Henry Salt's *A Plea for Vegetarianism*. The book discussed the moral reasons for being a vegetarian, including the inherent violence in the eating of meat and the nonviolence that could be achieved from abstaining from it – ideas that Gandhi identified with the ancient concept of *ahimsa*. The choice was now made in favor of vegetarianism, the spread of which henceforward became my mission (Gandhi, Pt.1, Ch.14), he wrote. In 1890, Gandhi joined the London Vegetarian Society and became a member of the Executive Committee.

In a speech *The Moral Basis of Vegetarianism* delivered to the Society in 1931, he said that people who became vegetarians purely for health reasons usually fail because vegetarianism requires a moral basis as well as a practical one. Some vegetarians made food a fetish and thought that by becoming vegetarians they could eat as much lentils, beans, and cheese as they liked – an approach that did not improve their health. The secret to remaining healthy is to cut down the quantity of one's food and reduce the number of meals.

In later life, when drinking goat milk helped him recover from a severe case of dysentery, he was forced to admit the necessity of adding milk to a vegetarian diet as a source of protein. Nonetheless, he called his inability to give up milk 'the tragedy of my life'. He accepted the consumption of eggs as long as they were unfertilized. Gandhi also shaped vegetarianism as a symbol of the Indian Independence movement. A famous vegetarian who was an admirer and friend of Gandhi was the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910) who became a vegetarian in 1888.

North America

In the United States, the most prominent advocate of vegetarianism was Henry David Thoreau (1817–62). He came to vegetarianism through his friendship with Ralph Waldo Emerson and the New England Transcendentalists who were influenced by Indian philosophy, especially the *Upanishads*. Thoreau wrote:

In the morning I bathe my intellect in the stupendous and cosmogonical philosophy of the *Bhagavad Gita*, since whose composition years of the gods have elapsed, and in comparison with which our modern world and its literature seem puny and trivial . . . I lay down the book and go to my well for water, and lo! there I meet the servant of the Brahmin, priest of Brahma, and Vishnu and Indra, who still sits in his temple on the Ganges reading the Vedas, or dwells at the root of a tree with his crust and water-jug. . . . The pure Walden water is mingled with the sacred water of the Ganges . . . (Thoreau, 1854, p.279).

Thoreau supplemented a mainly vegetarian diet with fish and meat from animals he killed himself, arguing that hunting brought people in contact with nature. One of his friends, the Protestant minister Sylvester Graham,

advocated a diet of pure water, fresh fruit and vegetables, moderate amounts of milk and eggs, and bread made from flour ground at home. Graham crackers were inspired by his teachings. In 1850, Graham and others founded the American Vegetarian Society modeled on the British organization. The vegetarian movement gained momentum and the American Vegetarian Party even put forth a candidate in the 1948 Presidential Election.

In the West, the 1960s saw a surge of interest in India, as hippies flocked to the Subcontinent, in part inspired by the example of the Beatles who went to India in 1968 to study Transcendental Meditation. All four Beatles were vegetarians at various points in their lives, with Paul McCartney remaining an outspoken advocate for vegetarianism. Today many vegetarians refuse meat because of animal rights issues, or concerns over animal treatment, a principle first espoused in Peter Singer's 1975 work *Animal Liberation*. Today vegetarians and even vegans are no longer regarded as eccentrics and not only Indian but mainstream restaurants offer a variety of vegetarian dishes.

Conclusion

Most people in the West experience Indian cuisine through restaurants. For vegetarian food, the main vehicle has been a category of South Indian restaurants often called 'Udupi restaurants' (Madsen and Gardella, 2011). Their menus feature South Indian vegetarian dishes such as sambar, rasam idlis, dosas, vadas, rice and coconut chutney, which are generally made with no onion or garlic (both avoided by orthodox Hindus). They have their origins in Hindu temples, where Brahmin cooks prepare strictly vegetarian food for worshippers. The most famous are in the town of Udupi in the state of Karnataka. In the 1920s some cooks from these temples began opening restaurants, firstly locally, then nationally, and eventually internationally. Some branched out into chains, including Woodlands, Dasaprakash, and Saravanaa Bhavan. They can be found in New York, Chicago and other urban areas and for many people represent an introduction to Indian vegetarian cuisine. There are even kosher South Indian restaurants.

Street food, which is largely vegetarian, is an important part of Indian foodways. (Kraig and Sen, 2013, pp171–172). Dishes such as chaat – a mixture of crumbly fried dough, potatoes, spices, yogurt, chutneys and other ingredients – have entered the Western mainstream at receptions, food carts and as pricey entrees in upscale modern Indian restaurants.

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Color coded map indicating vegetarianism as a percentage of the world population. India has more vegetarians than the rest of the world put together.[72] In 2007, UN FAO statistics indicated that Indians had the lowest rate of meat consumption in the world.[73] India, the world's second most populous country, has over 500 million vegetarians.[74] Vegetarians in India have been demanding meat-free supermarkets.[75] In Indian cuisine, vegetarianism is usually synonymous. These surveys indicate that even Indians who do eat meat, do so infrequently, with less than 30% consuming it regularly, although the reasons are mainly cultural.[81] In states where vegetarianism is more common, milk consumption is higher and is associated with lactase persistence. Vegetarianism in India. India has a rich and fascinating culture made up of different religious, ethnic, and cultural groups. Hinduism, the majority religion, encourages vegetarianism based on the principle of ahimsa, which can be translated as "abstaining from doing harm" to people as well as animals. Sikhism, Jainism, and Buddhism, three of the main minority religions, also encourage various degrees of vegetarianism. This means that when you eat a vegetarian meal in a South Indian restaurant, it will likely also be a vegan meal. Most traditional Indian vegan recipes come from the Southern Indian cooking tradition. I uncover vegan treasures all around the world, so you can be vegan anywhere and spread compassion everywhere. View all posts by Wendy Werneth at [Wendy Werneth](#).