

VEGETARIANISM, HINDUISM AND FOOD HABITS OF CHILDREN

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Food choices are extremely personal and no one has a right to dictate others in this matter. Although I was raised a strict vegetarian in India, I have given up extreme vegetarianism. This short essay discusses some moral and practical issues. The arguments are placed in separate paragraphs so that a reader who disagrees with me can refer to specific points of disagreements. Since the context for this essay is that of an immigrant in America, let us view the moral issues in the context of American food technology. Next, we discuss whether strict vegetarian diet alone is healthful. We conclude with some practical issues regarding raising strictly vegetarian children in America.

1) Food Related Technology: Food transport, refrigeration, synthetics, preservatives, plastics and modern humane low-pain slaughterhouses were absent in ancient times. An appeal of Hinduism is its absence of dogma and ability to evolve over time. Hindu sages discouraged nonveg foods mainly for intellectuals, (Brahmins) perhaps because nonveg can be too distracting from their prayer regimen. The warriors and farmers regularly ate nonveg foods. Had these same sages seen modern food technology, they may well have recommended a balanced healthy diet including fruits, vegetables, nonveg, and fiber –not fanatical zero-meat vegetarianism.

2) Morality: Nonviolence in the sense of avoiding pain to others is a high moral principle supported by Hinduism. Vedas tell us to treat all living things with equal respect, and regard wanton killing as sinful. However, Hinduism is not fanatical

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about nonviolence when one notes numerous examples including the fact that Lord Rama's father used to hunt for deer and Lord Krishna killed Kansa. Regarding food, ancient sages said: "Jeevo Jeevasya Jeevanam," which means that life is the very life (sustaining ingredient) of some other life! It is ridiculous to try to avoid or lament on moral grounds extensive killing occurring every minute inside human body at the cellular level. Jagadish Chandra Bose proved that plants are alive and do suffer pain when they are cut, just like animals. It is impossible to compare the pain of a slaughtered animal with the pain of plants when they are cut. We have no right to assume that the pain of plants is somehow of lower importance than the pain of animals. The nonviolence fanatics should not mow lawns, kill any pests and should willingly live among rats, mice, mites, lice, mosquitoes, stinging bees, snakes, roaches, germs, etc. A large suburban house must be protected by poisonous sprays to keep away all mites and bugs, condemning thousands of innocent bugs (also created by God) to slow painful deaths. Is it moral then to live in a large suburban home? I believe that the moral case for strict vegetarianism is weak, killing for food is pervasive in nature and limited eating of nonveg foods is not immoral.

3) Vegetarianism and spiritual progress: Spiritually evolved (satvik) people are found among vegetarians as well as nonvegetarians. The most evil person of 20th century, Adolf Hitler was a vegetarian. Vegetarians have no monopoly on spiritual progress. There is no reason to believe that the nonveg foods eaten by the Christian priests, Jewish rabbis or Muslim mullahs hinder their spiritual progress.

4) Fear of becoming Non-Hindu: There is an irrational fear among many vegetarian Hindus that if they eat even a minuscule quantity of nonveg foods they will suddenly become non-Hindu. It is well known that cow's milk contains trace amounts of cow's blood. So anyone who ever had a glass of milk in America is no longer a Hindu, since he may have unknowingly drunk cow's blood. The irrational fear may have been instilled by those who wanted to convert Hindus into their faiths, but let us not maintain it today.

5) Self discipline or burdening hosts: Vegetarianism can be suggested as a matter of noble self discipline. However, a strict vegetarian who has never tasted non vegetarian food varieties is obviously exercising less self discipline than one who has tasted these varieties and then gives them up. Vegetarians often impose inconvenience and burden of preparing another set of foods on a busy (American) hostess. A truly religious, self disciplined moral person will care for the potential inconvenience to others. There are better avenues for self discipline which are more private and do not inconvenience

others.

6) Health and Nonveg: Both vegetarian and nonveg foods can contain harmful ingredients and can cause serious diseases. The point is, one should try to avoid all harmful foods (vegetarian and non vegetarian) and harmful quantities. Just because some nonveg foods are harmful for some people in some quantities does not mean all nonveg foods are harmful to all in any quantity. To insist on zero nonveg foods is an extreme position. The rational criterion is whether certain food in certain quantity is harmful in light of a particular person's health –not whether the food is vegetarian or nonveg. Instead of saying “I avoid all nonveg foods,” a rational position is to say that “I avoid all foods that are harmful to my health.”

7) Anatomy: Human anatomy is remarkably similar throughout the world for all races, due to evolution over millions of years. The ability of humans to digest foods of all kinds is readily established by science. If any kind of food is suitable for five million (say) civilized people in any corner of the world, it is most likely also suitable for any normal civilized human, anywhere (barring food allergies or genetic factors, of course).

8) Ingredients: Strictly vegetarian diet does not contain adequate quantities of Niacin, Vitamin B complex, Omega 3 fatty acids needed as the brain food, some proteins and vitamins. To get the same level of some healthy ingredients from a strictly vegetarian diet it is often necessary to eat unhealthy large quantities of some tasteless vegetables. In short, there are healthy ingredients which can be cheaply and efficiently received by a nonveg diet.

9) Taste and Variety: Any food experience is more enjoyable for humans, the greater the variety. Vegetarian chefs should be admired for creating a large variety of vegetarian preparations. However, the same variety can be expanded at least ten-fold by judicious mixing from the large range of nonveg ingredients to the originally vegetarian preparations. The greater the number of ingredients, the greater the variety. The highly evolved Chinese and French cooking uses several meats. Some vegetarians argue that they do not like the taste of nonveg. However, the taste is felt on one's tongue and cannot depend on the source of ingredients. How can one not like the taste of something one has never even tried from knowing that one of the ingredients is meat?

10) Assimilation of children in American society: The children of immigrants of every group have a natural desire to assimilate with the mainstream. Some Indian parents insist that their children not eat any nonveg foods and talk admiringly of

other children who are strict vegetarians. This can conflict with their rationality and natural desire to assimilate. Children should be taught to eat all healthful foods with moderation and avoid any excess of any harmful foods –vegetarian or nonveg. There are several unhealthy things in American society including drugs, willingness to eat saliva contaminated foods, bringing dirty shoes into kitchens, etc. We should discourage all such unhealthy customs. However, the above arguments show that nonveg food is not one of the unhealthy things to be strictly avoided.

11) Vegetarianism in the Indian context: The animal slaughter technology in India is not discussed in public due to religious taboos. From the stink of places that sell nonveg foods, the technology appears to be rather backward. The problems are compounded by sloppy and unhealthy food-handling in many parts of India, and may be okay for well developed immune systems in India. Since the shelf life of nonveg foods without proper refrigeration is very short, it can be perfectly rational not to eat any nonveg in India.

To summarize, for the American context, I have made following points: (a) The moral and spiritual case for strict vegetarianism is weak, especially when one considers scientific facts about the pain suffered by plants, painless slaughter techniques in America and practical civility of caring for the convenience of (American) hosts. (b) The fear of becoming non-Hindu by ingesting small quantity of nonveg is irrational and the danger to health from nonveg foods is exaggerated. We should realize that human anatomy is similar across the world and several healthful and desirable vitamins and ingredients are nearly absent in strictly vegetarian foods. (c) From the hedonistic viewpoint of good life, it is irrational to deny oneself any particular kind of food, which is healthfully eaten by millions of civilized humans. (d) In the context of an immigrant from India, strict vegetarianism is a psychological hang-up, or a form of irrational extremism. Although one has a right to deny oneself any number of good things in life, forcing children to be strict vegetarian is not right. It amounts to transferring one's own hang-ups to one's innocent children. More seriously, strict vegetarianism imposed by parents unnecessarily conflicts with children's legitimate desire to assimilate in American life.