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## How I Defected from Vegetarianism

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*A new 'non-vegetarian' recounts her personal journey to eating animal foods—one that taught her that fish and meat are essential components of food systems and that they are no less ecological and humane than plant foods.*

During the last rainy season, I ate *esellu*, or winged termites, for the first time. For years, I had considered these insects a nuisance as they swarmed around lights during the rains, before shedding their wings and dying. But my attitude changed after I learnt that these creatures are dried and roasted for consumption, mainly by Dalit communities in the southern Deccan. Roasted with red rice and horse gram, the *esellu* tasted delicious.

It was certainly the most unique dish I had sampled since I expanded my diet to include animal foods 10 years ago. In addition to chicken, mutton, beef, pork and fish, I have consumed wild hog and rabbit. Some people find my shift puzzling. Most activists I meet, especially in farming circles, grew up vegetarian or converted to vegetarianism or veganism.

But my personal journey has taught me that meat is an essential component of food systems and that it is no less ecological and humane than plant foods. Besides, religious vegetarianism in India is rooted in casteist and discriminatory practices, which treat animal foods (except milk) as impure—even disgusting.

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I grew up in a vegetarian, Telugu-speaking family from the Komati, or merchant, caste. However, my parents did not exhibit an aversion to meat. Visiting Europe and the United States in the 1970s and 1980s, they had learnt to discard what they could not avoid, often just consuming the sides and desserts. As many families did in those times, they introduced eggs into our diet.

In school, I observed many kinds of food practices. My Parsi friend brought corned beef sandwiches while my Jain friend gave up root vegetables (onions, potatoes) during fasts. I was told that we were vegetarian because we believed in ahimsa or non-violence. But as I grew up, I recognised contradictions. For instance, many vegetarian aunties and uncles splurged on gold and silk, products of violence.

When I moved to the US for postgraduate studies in the late 1990s, I began reading about the belief systems of indigenous Americans. I was struck by the description of hunting as a spiritual activity. The hunter and prey are both part of a divine spirit, they believed. The hunter prays and asks the prey to gift itself to him. The hunter's community respects the prey's sacrifice by hunting only as much as necessary and by making full use of the prey.

Similar narratives deifying nature can be found in most indigenous communities and explain why they are better stewards of the environment than most mainstream populations.

Still, I remained a vegetarian because environmentalists, from the pioneering Rachel Carson onwards, argued that rearing animals for meat requires more resources than producing plant-based foods. At the time, I was in Iowa, in the middle of the never-ending cornfields for which the state is famous. Most of this corn was used to feed pigs, which I found wasteful. Today, 50% to 70% of Iowa's corn is used to make ethanol, a "green fuel", in the graveyard of a beautiful prairie ecosystem and its Native American culture.

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After graduating, I moved to Minnesota for work. As I became active in social and political causes, I quit my corporate job. When I spent some time on an organic farm, one of the owners, a retired psychiatrist, explained why meat eating was not as environmentally harmful as I had thought.

She kept her chickens in a large cage that could be moved from place to place, parking it in one spot for a few days at a time to fertilise the soil. She pointed out that farm animals mostly consumed farm waste, unlike animals in factory farms that are fed specially prepared fodder. Seeing how animals were an essential component of the farming system and how they improved farm efficiency eroded my resistance to animal-based food.

Back in India a few years later, I began working with grassroots organisations in Uttar Pradesh (UP) and Karnataka on farming, health, and livelihood. I realised that my food practices distanced me from many of my colleagues. At the Bengaluru non-profit where I worked for a few years, I was the “madam” who needed a separate vegetarian meal when chicken was ordered for the team. I was the only dominant caste member there, and the connection of caste to food was troubling

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Studies and surveys, including the fifth National Family Health Survey 2019-2021, reveal that the majority of Indians eat fish, chicken, or meat. Yet India is often considered a vegetarian country. Indian and Indian-origin leaders, industrialists, intellectuals, and so on, mostly hail from vegetarian Brahmin and merchant castes and perpetuate the image of India as a vegetarian country.

In the early 2010s, self-proclaimed *gau rakshaks* or cow protectors began lynching people, mainly working-class Muslims and Dalits, on the suspicion they had eaten beef or transported cattle for slaughter. Meanwhile, I was interacting with these communities and was gaining insights into their lives.

In rural India, these communities lived in the worst part of the village and owned marginal plots of the least fertile land—if they were lucky enough to own land. In cities, they lived in slums with the meanest of amenities. Untouchability prevailed. Even today, my Dalit colleagues are often served tea in disposable cups, and dominant caste Hindus refuse to eat food cooked by them.

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The practices of small and marginal farmers and pastoralists in India were ecologically sound, even more so than those of my farmer friend in Minnesota. I watched farmers gather fodder from the riverbank, or in and around fields, and even feed their cows and goats leftover rotis. Backyard poultry rearing was even more resource friendly—desi or naati chickens roamed freely and were fed grains or leftover food.

These communities were affectionate towards their animals but also recognised them as their “fixed deposits”—resources that could be encashed when required. Recognising the need to acknowledge these ecologically superior practices and to protest against the unfair treatment of these communities, I began eating animal foods.

In the past decades, calls by the elite for vegetarianism have been bolstered by global advocacy to reduce the consumption of animal foods—mostly red meat—to “save the planet”. These calls are unfairly applied to India. They do not acknowledge that Indians, especially the less privileged, have historically contributed little to climate change and that they consume a fraction of animal foods compared to the West.

Many activists go further and advocate veganism, citing the inhumane treatment of animals in industrial dairy farms. Industrial animal farming is definitely a concern—not only for inhumane treatment but also for environmental damage and the indiscriminate use of medicines, including antibiotics. For example, the use of diclofenac in dairy cattle has nearly wiped out the vulture population in South Asia.

However, these activists fail to recognise the harm done by industrial plant farming on a much larger scale. The conversion of forests, wetlands, and pasture lands into farmland has destroyed ecosystems, and pesticides kill a range of insects and other fauna. Monocropping and herbicide-tolerant seed varieties have led to the increasing use of herbicides, which similarly destroy “weeds” and pollute ecosystems.

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At the same time, spiritual movements across India have been advocating vegetarianism. In central UP, many Dalit families that I work with proudly proclaim that they follow “Jai Gurudev” and have given up meat and eggs. However, these families cannot afford the diverse foods necessary to maintain good nutrition on a vegetarian diet—they eat rotis, rice, potatoes and a smattering of vegetables. National goals to eradicate malnutrition cannot be achieved with such protein-deficient diets.

In the decade since I began eating animal foods, agrarian communities have been battered by policy and environmental changes. The monsoon has become more erratic across India, with poor rains during the growing season and heavy rainfall during harvest. Hailstorms and unseasonal heat spells have become common, and these are devastating crops.

In UP, the enforcement of cow slaughter bans has led to the collapse of village cattle markets, which traded in native cattle breeds. Poor farmers used to rear these hardy cattle, which could be let to pasture and were fed on farm waste. Those who could afford it shifted to crossbreeds or buffaloes, whose trade is not restricted to the same extent. However, these animals are typically reared in stalls and require specialised fodder, akin to industrial farming. Poorer families have shifted to goat rearing.

Animal rearing is one of the few livelihood options that have kept small and marginal farmers afloat economically. However, they, along with pastoralists, are struggling due to the loss of grazing lands, rising fodder costs, and the vulnerability of “improved” animal breeds to disease. Threats to their livelihoods have made things worse—where animal sacrifices and meat prasads (offerings) were once an integral part of Hindu festivals, today festivals are marked by bans on the sale of meat. Now, hygiene is being invoked to ban the sale of meat and even eggs by small vendors, who are overwhelmingly Muslim or Dalit.

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It is essential for traditionally vegetarian Indians to recognise that our diets are privileged and resource-intensive, and were possible because the diets of a majority of Indians were diverse, local, and seasonal, and included animal foods. These diets should be celebrated.

Demeaning and demonising animal foods contributes to deepening poverty and malnutrition among traditional meat-consuming communities. Invisibilising them, as more well-meaning vegetarians and vegans do, also has a negative effect—when these foods are not incorporated into educational material or interventions, the resulting message is that they are undesirable.

It is time to question our collective discomfort with animal foods, and to work together to build inclusive, just, and sustainable food systems.

*This is a slightly revised version of an article first published in Scroll.in under the title “How I became a ‘Non-Vegetarian’: Lessons from India’s Diverse Food Systems”*