

Motivations and Social Negotiations in the Adoption of Veganism: An Ethnographic Study from Contemporary India

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ABSTRACT

The current paper takes a look at the motivations and social negotiations involved in the adoption of vegan lifestyle among twenty seven (27) respondents in modern India. Semi-participant ethnographic research was conducted to explore how individuals get motivated to follow veganism through diverse and often overlapping approaches. Such decision making gets triggered by emotional discomfort after exposure to animal suffering and cruelty in the organized dairy, poultry and meat industries. Individual health concerns, environmental concerns, online information, social networks and relational influences also act as the main triggers for such transition. Many respondents shared that the vegan journey begins with food-related transition and then gradually extends into broader lifestyle changes. Veganism gradually affects their consumption habits, ritual participation, and even everyday interactions. Instead of presenting veganism as a fixed belief, this paper approaches it as a lived and well negotiated process shaped by bodily experience, social context and availability of vegan options. Respondents describe initial phases of doubt, adjustment, resistance and eventual acceptance. Emotional reactions are common, yet long-term continuation depends on practical adaptation within family systems, workplaces, and community spaces. This study tries to position individual narratives of respondents within anthropological theories of food, purity, embodiment, and lifestyle movements. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to an understanding of dietary changes as a socially immersed process unfolding within the specific cultural landscape of Indian regions.

Keywords: *Veganism, Ethnographic, Anthropology, Emotional Discomfort, Health Concerns, Environment, Digital Support, Dietary Changes.*

Introduction

Food in India is not merely a means of sustenance. It carries generational memory, social hierarchy, cultural value and social identity. From childhood, individuals learn what is “pure,” what is “acceptable,” and what is to be avoided. These classifications are shaped by religion, caste location, regional culture, and family practice (Bose, 1967; Nagla, 2015; Srinivas, 1952). As a common observation, milk, ghee and other dairy products occupy a special position in many Indian homes and included in the category of vegetarian food. These dairy products are believed to be strongly associated with nourishment, ritual offerings and cultural continuity.

In the current context, veganism represents a distinctive development. While vegetarianism is an integrated part of Indian food system since ancient times the concept of veganism involves eliminating all animal-derived products, including dairy and poultry products. Thus, its purely plant based and distinct

from the traditional vegetarian food which includes dairy products and, in some parts, even the eggs. This shift unsettles established food hierarchies and ritual habits. It raises questions within families and communities about tradition, health, and necessity.

Globally, veganism has been examined from several perspectives. Some scholars discuss it in relation to gender and animal ethics (Adams, 2010; Cole & Morgan, 2011). Other researchers study it as a lifestyle movement around everyday practice rather than some type of formal activism (Haenfler et al., 2012; Cherry, 2015; Greenebaum, 2012). Public health studies evaluate potential benefits and risks of plant-based diets (Appleby, 2013; Key et al., 2006; Nguyen et al., 2023). Similarly, the environmental studies connect dietary choices to climate change and consumption patterns (Poore & Nemecek, 2018; IPCC, 2019).

Within the limited scope of this study, it is found that less attention has been given to how individuals in India narrate their own vegan journeys. How does such a big change begin in their lives? What kind of internal and external factors influence such a transition? How do people manage social reactions while going through this transition? And how does the change move beyond food into other areas of their lives?

This paper is an attempt to address these questions through ethnographic engagement with 27 respondents who identify as vegan. Instead of assessing veganism, this study seeks to understand it as a process which is found to be gradual, layered, and socially negotiated.

Theoretical Orientation

The anthropological work available on food provides a useful lens for gaining understanding regarding dietary change. French Anthropologist, Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) threw light on how food related practices show deeper symbolic structures. Famous Anthropologist, Mary Douglas (1966, 1972) asserted that food taboos and classifications reflect social boundaries and existing ideas of order. In India, Vegetarianism has been commonly seen as deeply linked to notions of purity and hierarchy, particularly within caste structures (Narayanan, 2019).

When individuals move from vegetarianism to veganism, they are not simply altering their diet. They are reinterpreting established food categories. Dairy, which is culturally valued and often ritually significant, becomes subject to questioning. This reclassification disturbs familiar symbolic arrangements.

Personification is seen as another important dimension. Food choices are directly lived through the body. Any shifts in diet are seen to affect digestion, energy and even emotional states. Clifford Geertz (1973) laid emphasis on the importance of "thick description" in understanding lived meaning whereas George Herbert Mead (1934) highlighted the social formation of self through interaction. So vegan transitions are found to involve both bodily sensation and social interaction.

Lifestyle movement theory also provides insight into this regard. Haenfler et al. (2012) mention movements where shift is enacted through consumption choices in routine rather than public protest. Emily Cherry (2015) studied that vegan identity often develops slowly and sustained through day-to-day practice. Greenebaum (2012) observed that genuineness and consistency have become important themes for many vegans. At the same time, worldly conditions do matter. Marvin Harris (1979) argued that food systems are defined by economic and infrastructural realities. In contemporary India, expanding plant-based markets (ASSOCHAM, 2023; IMARC Group, 2023) and online connectivity through various platforms create new possibilities for practicing newer choices.

This study includes symbolic, embodied, social, and worldly perspectives to interpret the respondents' lived experiences.

Methodology

This research is based on semi-participant ethnographic fieldwork conducted as part of a doctoral study. The focus of the study is to understand veganism as a way of life in India. Twenty seven (27) respondents from different geographies, age groups, gender, professions, and caste backgrounds participated in the study. While this limited sample size does not aim for statistical generalization through this study, it reflects analytical depth compatible with qualitative anthropological research (Geertz, 1973).

The study is based on in-depth interviews with 27 such respondents who identify themselves as vegan. These respondents of the study were selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. The study sample shows diversity in the terms of age, gender, professional background, regional location, and caste affiliation. While the number may not be adequately representative, it is

analytically sufficient for observing patterns and thematic depth within qualitative ethnographic research. Veganism is an emerging way of life with very limited population size, so that also accounts for a small sample size.

Initial contacts with the respondents were established through vegan community networks and WhatsApp groups after which participants referred others within their social circles. Reaching respondents requires multiple strategies. Some participants were contacted through vegan community networks that exist in some of the cities and social media groups (WhatsApp). Researcher approached others through referrals from animal welfare organizations as some of the animal welfare organizations have vegan people volunteering or working from them. Snowball sampling played an important role because participants introduced the researcher to their friends and acquaintances who had adopted veganism. A few respondents were met during vegan events and informal gatherings.

In this research study, interviews were conducted both in person and telephonically (audio and video), depending on the participants' convenience, consent, geographical location and feasibility. Each interview lasted for two hours or more. Follow-up conversations with the participants provided clarification and deeper understanding. Casual interactions, such as shared meals or joint attendance at community meetings, provided additional context and greater understanding about their way of making choices.

Open-ended questions were asked to understand personal background, dietary history, health experiences, triggers and moment of transition, psychological responses, family/social interactions, workplace dynamics and lifestyle adjustments beyond food. Field notes were maintained throughout for self-record and easy references.

The researcher maintained a neutral position throughout the study. She remained intellectually engaged with the subject and encouraged respondents to narrate their experiences in their natural ways. The study aims to understand the mindset, initial transitional phase, challenges and support system vegans have in India.

Recurring patterns were identified using thematic coding related to motivation, emotional triggers, bodily experience, social negotiation and infrastructural adaptation.

Motivations: How the Transition Began

- **Health Concerns as a Starting Point**

Some of the study respondents mentioned that their vegan journey began with health-related challenges. Most common health issues were chronic acidity, irritable bowel symptoms, high cholesterol, hormonal imbalance, PCOD, skin issues, allergies, migraine and fatigue. Some had tried multiple diets before encountering plant-based approaches.

One respondent explained that she had struggled with digestion for years. After reading about dairy elimination, she decided to remove milk from her diet "only for a few weeks." When she experienced improvement, she continued. Gradually, other animal products were also removed from her plate.

Health was often described as an entry point rather than the final reason. Respondents shared that they began reading more about plant-based nutrition once they noticed some initial improvement (Appleby, 2013; Hargreaves et al., 2021). During this phase, they were also aware of concerns around nutrient adequacy (Nguyen et al., 2023; Soh et al., 2025). Several emphasized careful planning, supplementation and awareness related to protein requirements. A respondent who is himself a medical doctor explained how he could not continue veganism for long due to nutritional deficiencies but then he got the clue and again started vegan diet but this time he did not just remove food items instead replaced them carefully and succeeded in following vegan diet.

The body, therefore, acted both as motivator and monitor for some of the respondents.

- **Emotional Discomfort and Information Exposure**

A significant number of respondents described emotional unease after learning about industries involving animal breeding practices and abusing them for any kind of human gain. Exposure came through documentaries, YouTube videos, social media discussions or conversations with friends.

One respondent recalled watching a short video about dairy farming and feeling "restless for days." Although she had grown up as a vegetarian, she had not previously questioned milk consumption

as that never clicked her mind. The new information gathered through social media created discomfort. She described it not as anger but as an inability to ignore what she had seen.

Another respondent, who had visited a commercial dairy unit during college, said the experience stayed with him for years before he finally changed his diet.

These emotional reactions were rarely impulsive. Most respondents described a period of emotional absorption and information gathering. They read, discussed and hesitated before deciding. Cherry's (2015) work on lifestyle movements suggests that emotional triggers often interact with cognitive deliberation, which aligns with these narratives.

- **Digital Influence and Transnational Exposure**

Online platforms played a major role in shaping awareness in recent years. Respondents in this study mentioned climate reports (IPCC, 2019), environmental impact studies (Poore & Nemecek, 2018) and global health discussions circulating online.

Younger professionals, especially those working abroad or having corporate exposure, learnt about vegan options as part of international exposure. Returning to India, they chose to continue the same lifestyle.

Online communities like WhatsApp groups provide recipes, guidance, and reassurance. For individuals living in smaller towns without local vegan networks, digital networks and information offered connections.

- **Environmental and Public Health Awareness**

Some respondents were influenced by environmental discussions linking livestock (poultry, meat and dairy) to greenhouse gas emissions and water use (Springmann et al., 2018; Mekonnen & Hoekstra, 2012). A few mentioned concerns about antimicrobial resistance in food systems (Van Boeckel et al., 2015; World Health Organization [WHO], 2020). The study respondents mentioned that their concern towards climate change forced them to gradually move towards veganism.

However, environmental awareness usually strengthened an existing inclination rather than initiating it.

Table 1: Primary Motivational Factors for Adoption of Veganism (N = 27)

Primary Motivational Category	Number of Respondents (n=27)	Illustrative Orientation
Ethical / Compassion-based concerns (animal suffering, non-violence, spiritual reinterpretation, social justice)	17	Emotional discomfort after exposure to animal suffering, scriptural reinterpretation, shelter encounters, activist influence
Health-related concerns (chronic illness, metabolic issues, clinical observation, naturopathy trials)	7	Dietary experimentation following personal or observed illness
Environmental and sustainability awareness	3	Climate change evidence, ecological degradation, landscape impact

The above distribution suggests that ethical and compassion-oriented concerns formed the most frequent initiating trigger among respondents (17 of 27). It is observed; narratives reveal that motivations were rarely isolated. In case of some of the respondents, health experimentation later intersects with ethical reflection, and environmental awareness strengthens already emerging commitments. Rather than linear decision-making, respondents describe cumulative layering of reasons over time showing overlap of thoughts. This indicates that vegan adoption is not just a single decision point and more of a gradual alignment of knowledge, emotion and lived experience.

Note. Though many respondents reported secondary reinforcing motivations, the table reflects the dominant initiating trigger identified in narrative accounts.

For many respondents, veganism began as a change in dietary practice but with time extended into other aspects of life.

Bigger Picture

- **Beyond the Plate**

After eliminating animal-based foods, respondents began avoiding leather products, silk clothing, and cosmetics involving animals testing. Changes were often gradual due to financial constraints. One respondent said she replaced items “when they wore out” rather than discarding them immediately to reduce carbon footprint.

This gradual expansion reflects lifestyle movement patterns described by Haenfler et al. (2012).

- **Ritual and Cultural Adaptation**

Milk and ghee are central in many of the Indian rituals. Respondents navigate these contexts carefully. Some prepare sweets using plant-based substitutes for the festival. Others participate in social events without consuming certain items.

These adjustments require sensitivity. They illustrate how dietary change interacts with symbolic systems (Douglas, 1966). This also reflects that respondents took a balanced approach to continue the traditions using their vegan lens and newly acquired values instead of blindly following the ritual as it is or declining it.

- **Emotional and Experiential Shifts**

Respondents described mixed emotions during transition. Relief on improved health was commonly noticed among the study participants. At the same time, explaining their choice repeatedly at every forum could be tiring, but some of the participants find this as an opportunity to spread awareness about veganism and their rationale behind following this kind of lifestyle.

One respondent noted feeling “lighter mentally” after aligning her actions with her understanding and not following the general track of the common society where cruelty has been so much normalized. Another described initial isolation but later gained confidence as she connected with others. The transition, therefore, involves emotional as well as practical change.

Social Negotiation

- **Within Families**

Family reactions varied. Some were supportive though others worried about nutrition. In dairy and poultry, meat consuming households, separate cooking arrangements were sometimes necessary. Over time, visible stability in health reduced the concerns the family members had.

- **In Workplaces and Public Spaces**

Urban workplaces increasingly accommodate dietary preferences. In smaller towns, respondents often carry meals. These strategies reflect negotiation and even adjustments rather than confrontation. One of the participants mentioned that it needs extra effort to stay vegan as in most of the social gathering, dairy is very common in India, so they either carry their food or eat at home or choose from the limited options available at the function.

- **Market Infrastructure**

Growing availability of plant-based products in Indian cities (ASSOCHAM, 2023; IMARC Group, 2023) made continuation easier. Material conditions thus influenced sustainability of practice (Harris, 1979). Respondents mention that in most of the state capitals and bigger cities online stores easily provide plant based milk and other vegan suppliants and other items of daily use. This has facilitated them having a satisfactory life and they do not feel compromised.

Discussion

The predominance of ethical and compassion-oriented triggers among respondents does not reflect ideological rigidity. Rather, it reflects the core of emotional response in choosing dietary reconsideration. The study also suggests that long-term continuity depended less on emotional intensity and more on practical adaptation, bodily experience, and social negotiation. Improvement in health markers, easy access to vegan products and supportive networks played stabilizing roles. This distinction between the initial and maintenance phase is analytically significant. The study findings reflect that vegan adoption among respondents shows multiple triggers and non-uniform patterns. In the beginning, it is often linked to health concerns or emotional discomfort, followed by reflection and gradual experimentation. Continuation depends on physical and emotional outcomes, social negotiation and infrastructural support.

Veganism in this context appears as everyday practice shaped by family systems, digital connectivity and availability of vegan options and less as an abstract ideology.

Conclusion

This study suggests that vegan transition in modern India unfolds through layered motivations and sustained negotiation. Beginning frequently with health or emotional triggers, the shift extends into broader lifestyle values, practices and social interactions. Understanding veganism as lived experience provides significant insight into changing food identities in India.

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