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Veganism as an Emerging Identity: An Anthropological Review

Karuna Singh*

Department of Anthropology, University of Rajasthan, Jaipur, Rajasthan, India.

*Corresponding Author: researchkaruna@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades, veganism has evolved from a niche dietary choice into a globally recognized ethical and social identity, warranting in-depth scholarly attention. This review brings together anthropological perspectives to show that vegan identity is a powerful moral challenge to systems of domination. Here, theoretical framework draws heavily upon Social Ecology (Bookchin), which asserts that the exploitation of animals is fundamentally rooted in social hierarchy, and Jane Goodall's Principle of Continuity, which provides the ethical basis for rejecting the outdated human/animal dualism by affirming shared sentience. This framework establishes that the choice to go vegan is an act of moral reconstruction, moving beyond private health to public political commitment. The construction of this identity involves complex social processes. The review examines how ethical boundaries are constructed: individuals engage in inward moral self-fashioning and outwardly perform this identity through deliberate boundary work—rejecting culturally central symbols like milk and meat, as well as other animal products due to their association with cruelty. In the Indian context, this identity further challenges historical caste-based purity norms, creating a rupture with inherited cultural practices. These boundaries and the identity itself are heavily performed and sustained in the digital sphere. Online platforms like Instagram, WhatsApp and YouTube serve as key arenas for expressing vegan values, networking, and building imagined communities. This digital performance provides crucial social reinforcement for individuals navigating a non-dominant lifestyle, acting as a powerful tool for global advocacy. Ultimately, this anthropological perspective reveals that the emerging vegan identity offers a blueprint of hope and action for the planet. By rejecting the resource-intensive system of animal agriculture, it models structural change necessary for climate change mitigation and a solution to global food crises. By challenging the ethical justification for animal massacre, this identity aligns with the philosophical insight of Pythagoras: "As long as men massacre animals, they will kill each other." Thus, the cultural shift toward veganism is foundational for achieving a more compassionate, sustainable, and peaceful world.

***Keywords**: Veganism, Identity, Anthropology, Morality, Digital Activism, Planetary Health, Cultural Change.*

Introduction

Over the last two decades, veganism has moved from being individual dietary choice to a globally visible ethical, cultural, and social movement. While veganism is often framed through the lens of compassionate living, nutrition or environmental sustainability, its emergence as a distinct social identity has attracted growing scholarly attention. Across cities, digital platforms, and activist spaces, veganism today is expressed not only through food choices but through practices of self-making, community building, and political engagement (Cherry, 2015; Twine, 2017).

In India, veganism intersects with long-standing traditions of vegetarianism, ancient naturopathy and ayurvedic practices, caste dynamics, environmental crises, and emerging middle-class identities, giving it a distinctive socio-cultural texture (Srinivas, 2006; Balaram, 2018). This rising identity is a direct cultural response to the dual planetary crises of the Anthropocene: the unsustainable pressures of climate change and the persistent challenge of global food insecurity. The current industrial food system, dominated by resource-intensive animal agriculture, has become a primary driver of carbon emissions, land degradation, and biodiversity loss, directly threatening the health of populations.

Despite this surge in visibility, the majority of research still focuses on what vegans eat rather than who vegans are. Nutritionists emphasize plant-based health outcomes; environmentalists focus on carbon and methane emissions. Anthropologists, however, are uniquely positioned to examine how veganism functions as a moral, cultural, and political identity, negotiated through everyday practices, social boundaries, and broader structures of power (Cole & Morgan, 2011; Greenebaum, 2012). This review argues that veganism represents a primary, ethically charged social identity that challenges traditional boundaries between human and nonhuman life, between the private and the political, between religious and morally acceptable values and between cultural continuity and rupture.

This paper reviews key theoretical and empirical contributions from anthropology and related disciplines to understand veganism as an emerging identity. It argues that vegan identity functions through three interconnected domains: (1) the ethical and ecological frameworks that give veganism its moral force (2) the social resemblance, unity and boundary that sustains this identity, and (3) the internal mechanics of identity construction.

Theoretical Framework and Position

Anthropological approaches to identity emphasize that identities are constructed, performed, and contested rather than static attributes (Barth, 1969; Jenkins, 2014). Veganism fits into this analytical frame as a lifestyle movement (Haenfler et al., 2012) and a form of ethical self-fashioning (Foucault, 1985; Faubion, 2011). Vegans actively construct their identities through everyday practices—what they eat, what they refuse to eat, how they narrate their choices, and how they engage with others socially.

The anthropology of morality provides another crucial lens. Scholars like Zigon (2007) and Robbins (2004) argue that moral practices emerge in everyday negotiations with social structures. Veganism, as practiced across different contexts, exemplifies this moral reflexivity: individuals critically examine inherited cultural norms (e.g., the sacredness of milk in India, animal sacrifice as religious practice or meat as a marker of modernity and nutrition) and reorient their lives accordingly.

Philosopher and ethologist Jane Goodall has long emphasized the principle of continuity—the shared sentience and emotional lives of humans and other animals (Goodall, 2005). Her work bridges moral philosophy, ethology, and environmental ethics, challenging the anthropocentric hierarchies that underlie animal exploitation. Goodall's call to "change our minds" about animals resonates with the social ecology perspective of Murray Bookchin (1982), which argues that the domination of nature stems from entrenched systems of social domination. Together, these frameworks explain why veganism is not merely a dietary choice but a critique of systemic domination by one species over the rest of all and a movement of moral and ecological reconstruction.

Symbolic anthropology also plays a role in understanding veganism's cultural negotiations. Mary Douglas's (1966) theory of purity and pollution helps explain how vegans reinterpret traditional symbols like milk, ghee, and meat, categorizing them not as "pure" but as "polluting" due to their association with cruelty and environmental harm. Similarly, Lévi-Strauss's (1964) analysis of food as "good to think with" highlights how food practices are sites of meaning-making and cultural transformation.

Methodology

This paper adopts an integrative and conceptual review with the purpose to systematically synthesize knowledge from diverse academic fields—particularly socio-cultural anthropology, ethical studies, and sociology—to construct a conceptual framework for understanding veganism as an emerging social identity. Such an approach is well suited for establishing a theoretical foundation that can guide future empirical research.

- **Search Strategy and Source Selection**

The literature review was conducted through major academic databases including Scopus, Web of Science, and JSTOR, complemented by relevant books, open-access journals, organizational reports,

and verified digital repositories. This ensured comprehensive coverage of both scholarly debates and contemporary reflections on veganism, identity, and ethical consumption.

The inclusion criteria prioritized peer-reviewed journal articles, seminal monographs, and key philosophical and policy texts addressing the cultural, social, and moral dimensions of lifestyle movements. Sources focusing exclusively on nutritional science, market economics, or climate modelling without behavioral or anthropological perspectives were excluded.

- **Analytical Approach**

The collected literature was examined using a **Thematic Synthesis** method. Rather than providing a sequential summary of sources, this approach grouped arguments into conceptual clusters and critically compared them to identify patterns, tensions, and emergent insights.

Review Section A: The Mechanics of Identity (Inward)

The construction of vegan identity begins as an internal, moral, and cognitive behaviour. Anthropological studies on subcultures and lifestyle movements show how individuals adopt ethical commitments that shape their sense of self (Haenfler et al., 2012; Kymlicka & Donaldson, 2014). For many vegans, the transition begins with a critical event—exposure to the cruelties of animal agriculture, a health crisis, or environmental knowledge—that disrupts habitual practices and compels moral reflection (Greenebaum, 2012; Cherry, 2015).

In the Indian context, identity-making is shaped by complex cultural histories. Vegetarianism is often linked to upper-caste purity norms, while meat consumption can signal caste transgression or modern cosmopolitanism (Srinivas, 2006; Natrajan & Jacob, 2018). Veganism intervenes in this landscape by rejecting both meat and dairy—thereby challenging the cultural centrality of milk, which has long symbolized purity and prosperity (Doniger, 2010). Vegans actively redefine what is morally pure and impure, transforming inherited cultural symbols. Anything which involves animal suffering, exploitation, abuse or torture is considered unethical and immoral.

This identity-making involves daily acts: reading labels, refusing ghee-laden sweets, not promoting entertainment involving animal abuse, using vegan clothing, shoes and cosmetics, explaining one's choices to family, or joining online vegan communities. Scholars have described this as moral self-making, where individuals craft a coherent ethical identity through disciplined practice (Faubion, 2011; Sykes, 2009). Such practices blur the line between private lifestyle and political commitment.

Review Section B: The Performance of Identity (Outward/Social)

Vegan identity is not only constructed inwardly but also performed and negotiated socially. Drawing on digital anthropology and social movement theory, scholars have shown how veganism thrives on networked activism (Anderson, 1983; Lewis, 2018). Online platforms like WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube have become key arenas for expressing vegan values, sharing information, supporting beginners, teaching coping up mechanisms and building moral communities (Laestadius et al., 2014; Sneijder & te Molder, 2009).

Vegan influencers and activists use digital spaces to perform identity through recipes, ethical reflections, protests, activism and advocacy campaigns. These performances help stabilize identity categories, create imagined communities (Anderson, 1983), and provide social reinforcement for individuals navigating a non-dominant lifestyle.

In India, urban middle-class vegans often rely on digital networks to find plant-based alternatives, organize potlucks, or advocate for policy changes (Balaram, 2018). These spaces also allow boundary work—defining who counts as "truly vegan," policing purity, or engaging in debates over issues like honey, palm oil, or lab-grown meat (Cole & Morgan, 2011). Such boundary negotiations show that vegan identity is dynamic and contested rather than monolithic. These platforms have diverse range from veganism leading to minimalism to veganism full of ethical variety and options for vegan entrepreneurship.

Conclusion and Contribution

- **Contribution to Anthropology**

First, this research challenges key anthropological dualisms. Vegan identity destabilizes the boundary between nature and culture by recognizing animals as sentient beings with agency, thereby

questioning the human/animal divide (Descola, 2013). It also disrupts modern/traditional binaries by simultaneously drawing on traditional principles (e.g., *ahimsa*) and global ethical discourses.

Second, veganism exemplifies ethical self-making in contemporary societies. It offers anthropologists a case study of how individuals negotiate moral life within and against dominant cultural structures (Robbins, 2004; Zigon, 2007).

Third, this paper situates veganism at the intersection of Food Anthropology, Environmental Anthropology, and the Anthropology of Moral Life, filling a gap in existing literature that tends to treat veganism as a nutritional or environmental phenomenon rather than a cultural identity.

- **Broader Implications for Planetary Health, Food Justice, and Peace**

The anthropological understanding of vegan identity possesses profound implications for **Planetary Health** and global policy, moving beyond simple individual choice to offer a societal blueprint for sustainability. Efforts to shift diets for climate change mitigation, zoonotic disease prevention, and public health often fail because policymakers ignore the cultural and moral meanings of food (FAO, 2020; IPCC, 2019). This identity offers hope by providing a powerful, culturally sanctioned pathway toward solving the world's most pressing ecological and humanitarian crises.

  - **Climate Change Mitigation and Food System Transformation (Action):** The emerging vegan identity actively models the structural changes required to mitigate climate breakdown. By rejecting animal agriculture, which accounts for significant greenhouse gas emissions and land use, this identity translates personal ethics into a direct reduction of personal carbon footprint. This review shows that when policies promote this identity—for instance, by adopting plant-rich institutional catering—they are leveraging cultural desire for ethical living to achieve measurable **climate resilience**. This offers a scalable, socio-cultural alternative to top-down, punitive environmental policy.
  - **Social Justice, Food Crisis, and Hunger (Hope):** The shift away from feeding human-edible crops to livestock is fundamentally an act of food justice. The vegan identity challenges the resource-intensive system where vast tracts of land are dedicated to growing food for animals, a practice that contributes to global hunger and resource scarcity. By promoting local, plant-based foodways, the vegan identity models a system that is more efficient, equitable, and sustainable, directly addressing the UN's goals for food security and planetary regeneration.
  - **Ethical Reconstruction and the Pursuit of Peace:** At its deepest level, the vegan identity is a movement against systemic violence and domination. This moral stance is best encapsulated by the ancient Greek philosopher Pythagoras: **"As long as men massacre animals, they will kill each other."** This powerful philosophical insight argues that the cruelty enacted upon the most vulnerable members of the ecosystem inevitably fosters a culture of violence among humans. The vegan identity, therefore, is fundamentally a project of **cultural disarmament**. By challenging the hierarchy that legitimizes the exploitation of one species over another, this identity models a necessary moral reconstruction that is foundational to achieving a more compassionate, less violent, and ultimately more peaceful human society.

- **Future Research**

Future research can explore comparative ethnographies of vegan identity across caste, class, and religion in India; longitudinal studies of community persistence; and policy–movement interactions. Such work will deepen understanding of how ethical identities drive cultural change in the Anthropocene.

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