

Vegetarianism and Communalism

T Vijayendra

[Vegetarianism is not same as being a vegetarian. Vegetarianism is an ideology and a discourse. It believes in and propagates that being vegetarian makes one a better, purer and higher person and by implication people who are non-vegetarians are the other, lower human beings. On its own and in normal times it could be quite harmless, as indeed the vegetarians in the West are. But in India, and recently in Gujarat, it is part of a discourse of building a negative image of the Muslims. Communal riots and killing can happen only when the majority community silently endorses it. The basis of this silent endorsement is the image of the other. A sane attitude about food and nutrition should be adopted.]

Vegetarianism is not same as being a vegetarian. Throughout history most people had less than 15 % non-vegetarian food in their diet. However it was a very important source of essential protein and was and has always been relished. Most of it was food from water-crabs, prawns and fish. Different ecological zones produced different sources of meal. For American Indians it was bison. Wild boar, rabbits, game birds etc. were and are common in many parts of the world. Regular meat became possible only when domestication of animals and agriculture became more important than hunting and gathering. And in some areas in India where agriculture was highly productive and domestic animals were more important as draught animals, beef eating was discouraged. That is the origin of taboo on beef in India. Religions like Buddhism and Jainism discouraged beef eating. However, most Buddhists all over the world are not vegetarians. Even today more than 90% of Indians eat non-vegetarian food some time or the other. Vegetarianism, that is propagating and extolling it, was never an important issue.

With the advent of Industrial revolution, production of meat, poultry and fish began to get commercialized. By twentieth century the consumption of meat in wealthier families and working class increased enormously. At the same time the scale of production made it highly unhygienic and unsafe. The butcheries were and still are extremely filthy and cruel to the slaughtered animals. Upton Sinclair in his book "The Jungle" (1906) and more recently Robin Cook in his book "Toxin" have documented it forcefully. Reading these books made many give up eating meat and poultry produced by the industry and some people began to propagate the virtues of vegetarian diet. This was the birth of vegetarianism in Europe and the USA. It was and still is a small movement and most people regard them as cranks.

In his book *The Mahatma and the Ism* EMS Namboodripad described Gandhi's first visit to England. While all the progressives were talking about publication of Marx's *Capital*, Gandhi was searching for vegetarian hotels/boarding places in London. In that search he came across vegetarianism. It was Gandhi who brought vegetarianism to India. To repeat, vegetarianism is an ideology as against preference for vegetarian food which is a choice which one may exercise as an individual or group for short or long periods without adding a value judgment to it.

Gandhi made vegetarianism as an important component of his Non-violence movement. It became a must in the *ashram life* and almost all followers were under pressure to become vegetarians. It also became a part of upward mobility of many lower castes and in at least one case, among tribals (the Tana Bhagat movement among Oraons of Jharkhand). Vegetarianism came to be associated with a moral superiority, requiring moral courage similar to

practising non-violence in the freedom movement. However the practice of vegetarianism did not become very popular. Lower castes and poor people could not stop eating the little protein that was available from home range poultry or pork. Most tribals could not afford not to eat some wild life food that was easily accessible. But vegetarianism did become associated with higher value system, an ideal, which while one could not achieve in one's own life nevertheless was respected.

However this was not so in areas like Bengal, Kerala, Goa and in most of the coastal regions. And it is not accidental that these areas are relatively free from communal violence. Communal violence is by and large a Hindi heartland or as it is called the cow belt phenomenon. The Muslims as a social group never accepted vegetarianism, although several Muslims like Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan and Maulana Azad were important followers of Gandhi.

NON-VIOLENCE AND VEGETARIANISM

It was Gandhi who made the connection between non-violence and vegetarianism. In reality there is no such connection. Many vegetarians are violent people and many so-called non-vegetarians are non-violent. Otherwise there will be no saints among Muslims and Christians. Sufis and Quakers can and many do eat meat. Even most Buddhists in the world are fish and meat eaters. Buddha himself ate meat and his last meal was pork. Buddhists also eat beef. By making such a connection, Gandhi managed to give a high moral and superior status to vegetarianism. (However Gandhi opposed any legislation to ban beef eating.) And since it is only Hindus (although a minuscule minority) are vegetarians and it was religions like Buddhism and Jainism who talked about *Ahimsa* or Non-violence it got associated with Hindus. As a matter of fact, except in Jainism, there is no connection between *Ahimsa* and vegetarianism. This paved the way for vegetarianism to be used as a tool for communalism.

COMMUNALISM

Images of Muslim community as the other have been built around facts that make them different from Hindus in India. Because they are different, poor and have less power therefore they are lower human beings. That has always been the logic of racism and communalism. The specific image here is that they are beefeaters, dirty, highly charged sexually (again associated with eating beef), have four wives, ready to seduce Hindu women, convert them and add to their harem, potential rapists and so on. Other innocent differences are added to make the picture complete. Like they shave their mustache and keep the beard, whereas the Hindus keep the mustache and shave the beard. After the partition of India another addition is the charge of loyalty to Pakistan and other Islamic countries.

This image has been built over a period of last 150 years or so. The Hindu-Muslim divide also has this long history. It has resulted in the partition of the country and a series of communal riots after independence. Riots and killing are possible because the communities on the whole believe in these images and end up endorsing the riots. Deconstructing these images and building saner understanding about these differences is part of the secular agenda.

A SANE ATTITUDE

Vegetarianism, came as a reaction to capitalist production of meat and poultry in the West. It is on the one hand an extremely cruel and unhygienic process, it

also led to over consumption of red meat. There is also an ecological argument against red meat. Meat is produced by animals which eat grass and grain etc. The conversion ratio in terms of energy and nutrition is as high as 8. So where agriculture production is good it makes sense to avoid eating meat. In grass lands where rearing domestic animals is the main activity meat eating becomes natural. In coastal regions and in areas like Bengal fish and other food from water become naturally part of the nutrition.

Capitalist production of agriculture and hence vegetarian food is not innocent either. The use of pesticides makes it highly toxic. It is capitalist production of animal food like oil cakes that helps in production of beef and meat. The case of Soyabean production in India is illustrative. It reduced the acreage under *Dal* thus increasing the price enormously and reducing the protein intake of vegetarians. The oil cake is exported to Europe where it is fed to cows and pigs. The export is probably handled by the vegetarian 'oil kings' of Gujarat. Thus beef in Europe is supported at the cost of reduced intake of vegetarian protein by vegetarians themselves. Then production of milk sweets is similar to beef production in terms of load on ecology. It requires a large quantity of milk to produce these *mawe ki mithai* and *chhene ki mithai*. So as a part of sane policy it is essential to reduce production of Soyabean, restore acreage for *Dal* and reduce production of milk.

As a naturalist or ecologist one would see a lot of violence being carried out by all (vegetarians and non-vegetarians) in the capitalist society. A large number of species are endangered and some have become extinct due to what the naturalists call habitat loss. Human society is taking over a large amount of space and resources from other living beings resulting in this environmental and ecological disaster. In the final analysis global warming is essentially a violence done by human being on the planet earth. It is this over exploitation of resources of the earth and depriving other species their habitat-place to live, access to food that is real violence and not eating so called non-vegetarian food by people.

And so within the constraints of ecology, one still has choice of what to eat. A variety of balanced diet menus are available for different ecological regions of the world. There is absolutely no need to preach vegetarianism. In fact one should stop using terms like vegetarian and non-vegetarian which divide people unnecessarily. Passages from the Guru Granth Sahib <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guru Granth Sahib](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guru_Granth_Sahib)> (the holy book of Sikhs) say that only fools argue over this issue. Guru Nanak <[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guru Nanak](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Guru_Nanak)> said that any consumption of food involves a drain on the Earth's resources and thus on life. □□□