VIEWS | OPINION

Vegan industry must capitalise on rising veganism in Indians

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India is well known for its widely vegetarian population. Going vegan is just a step further into plant-based diets. Indians are turning to veganism due to health

concerns and as plant-based foods gain acceptance, the companies that are providing vegan solutions are also on the rise. Veganism as a lifestyle acceptance needs efforts and alternatives to replace animal-based products as well as have a flexible and alternative meal option to fulfil the nutritional needs. The Vegan industry is showing a 20 per cent growth rate, post-COVID-19 aftermath.

According to a 2019 survey, 63 per cent of Indians were willing to replace meat with plant-based options for their dietary needs. The survey revealed that there is a big market for plant-based foods in a country of over a billion. 2020 has completely changed how we live, travel, especially eat and has been the most evolving time since history. Notably, it has brought a new version to going vegan - one without meat and animal-based products.

Veganism benefits the environment by reducing greenhouse gases that are emitted directly or indirectly by the livestock sector and the biggest advantage is that the plant-rich diet has health benefits for our own bodies. Lactose intolerance (due to milk and milk derivatives) and anaphylactic symptoms (allergy to peanuts, tree nuts and seafood) are the leading causes of an increase in veganism. Studies have also shown that milk is one of the leading causes of diabetes.

‘Fad’ or ‘trend’ perhaps would be a wrong word for something that comes out of a deeper philosophy. Veganism, after all, rests on the idea that humans are compassionate beings and it is in their nature to choose kindness over killing—or that such a state must be aspired to and can be taught or inculcated.

In countries where meat consumption is high, animals are ill-treated including intensive confinement to the area, mutilations (without anaesthesia) and slaughter causing fear and stress. For people who love consuming meat products, the dietary change could be challenging. The word ‘switching’ to the vegan diet is also not easy looking at the culture and social-economic factors, the easy availability or accessibility of plant-based food. However, along with these challenges, there is sharp availability of plant-based products in the market in any part of the world.

Making a connect

Venus Williams - tennis player, Tony Gonzalez - NFL player, David Haye - British boxer, Nate Diaz - martial artist, Heather Mills- skier, Lewis Hamilton- Formula 1 driver are a few of the international athletes who have adopted a vegan lifestyle and performed better than ever. Such influencers turning vegan have inspired many of their fans and followers to go vegan too!

Various Indian brands and startups are flourishing and have made their place in the market and among vegans. Goodmylk, SAIN, Good Dot, EVO foods, WEGAN foods, etc. are a few of them.

Many food manufacturers, entrepreneurs, and restaurants are coming up with vegan alternatives to regular foods. For example, alternatives to milk, butter, cheese, and eggs are now available. Here, the challenge is to replicate the same texture, aroma, flavour, and appearance, without sacrificing the nutritional content of the original product. Vegan alternatives of milk cannot be anymore termed as ‘milk’ on the packaging of the products to distinguish from the dairy products.

Due to the increase in sedentary lifestyles people have started suffering from lifestyle disorders and becoming health conscious is moving them towards veganism. Also, the products must not contain any animal-derived genetically modified organisms (GMOs) or animal-derived genes used to manufacture products and the product should not be cross-contaminated with any other animal product.

Vegan products are exclusive as well as expensive and many people cannot afford a vegan lifestyle. Moreover, there are only a few numbers of restaurants that provide vegan foods and have limited alternatives. There is very little scope for vegan restaurants but the scope for convenient vegan foods is rising as they have a longer shelf life and are easy to digest.

Pros with Cons

There are a few limitations of a strict vegan diet that despite gaining immense popularity, it lacks few essential nutrients which have to be supplemented additionally. There are benefits of a strict vegan diet like foods that are rich in vitamin C, high in fibres, low in saturated fats but there are also few disadvantages, as the vegan diet is deprived of vitamin B12, vitamin D, folic acid, calcium, zinc. Although there are supplements available, they are full of fats and sugars which need to be considered.

To counter the loss of vitamin B12, vegans proclaim the availability of certain plant sources such as seaweed, fermented soy, and spirulina which are claimed to contain B12. But when derived from plants, they contain cobamide that are analogues of B12 and thus block the intake.

And, due to low amounts of folic acids from plant sources, it decreases the rate of iron absorption by 85 per cent which causes anaemia which is prevalent in both men and women. It is also noted that lactating mothers if consuming a vegan diet become deficient in B12 and the child suffers from neurological disorders.

Veganism as a lifestyle acceptance will need efforts and alternatives to replace animal-based products as well as have a flexible and alternative meal option to fulfil the nutritional needs. For protein sources nuts and seeds, legumes, lentils, and combinations with lentils can be used and omega 3 Chia and flax seeds, etc. can be used.

Veganism faces a challenge in terms of changing people’s perceptions, availability, and affordability. There is a growing body of research that indicates the positive effects that a vegan diet rich in fibrous foods like vegetables, fruits, nuts, legumes, seeds, and cereals can have on our microbiota (the bacteria that lives in our guts).

According to surveys conducted, a rise in vegan food in India is expected by the end of 2021, as people are noticing many health benefits like lowering cholesterol levels in the body, weight loss, reversing lifestyle disorders, etc. Many celebrity stars are also promoting veganism and its health benefits. As people are aware of the positive results of following a vegan diet more and more people have started following veganism which will lead to the growth of the vegan food market in India.

Many people share their experiences about being vegan and coping up with everyday life and the changes that happened after embracing veganism. Many vegan recipes are available online which will provide better options for vegan food. There is a rise in the Indian vegan market since 2017 and is expected to rise more by 2025.

Future trends

Since India has a 1.4 billion population, vegan food has a huge scope and slowly it is growing. Particularly, post COVID-19 scenario, the Vegan industry is showing a 20 per cent growth rate and few trends are multigrain foods, plant-based protein, plant-based milk, plant-based meat alternatives. Industry and academia need to work together to meet the consumers' acceptance and real innovation for affordable solutions.

Recently the Food Safety and Standards Authority of India (FSSAI) has released a draft on the vegan standard of food which will surely give a boost to the industry. As per the regulation, every package of certified vegan foods shall carry the logo that would help consumers effortlessly identify and differentiate between vegetarian and vegan products. This would increase transparency and offer several services to assess, monitor, and ensure the safety of vegan food products.

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