

Chapter 9

Hindu Youth Perceptions on Vegetarianism and Veganism in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal

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Abstract

Historically, a dearth of local literature exists on diets and food choices of the South African Indian community. While some detail of the culinary influences of the local cuisine is documented in historical literature on Indians in South Africa, perceptions of dietary trends and food preferences of the different generational levels are not explicit in local studies. Iconic cookery books such as *The South African Indian Cookbook* (Makan 1989) and *Indian Delights* (Mayat 1982), tend to showcase the preservation of traditional recipes among previous generations of Indians and more recently a plethora of websites, blogs and other social media platforms engage classic and more contemporary, evolving culinary tastes but there are sparse sociological studies on the dietary choices and food preferences within the Indian community, particularly that of Indian youth. This paper focuses on Hindu youth in KwaZulu-Natal, the province in South Africa that is home to the largest number of South Africans of Indian descent. The study is based on a sample of 36 Hindu youth residing in Durban, between the ages of 18 and 35 years. Much of the impetus for this paper was to provide some insight into contemporary youth perceptions of vegetarianism and veganism, among a segment of South African youth who are culturally aware of these practices.

1 Introduction

The study attempts to contribute some insight into Hindu youth perceptions of vegetarianism and veganism within the context of a growing interest in these dietary choices among youth globally, as well as in South Africa. While vegetarianism and veganism as lifestyle choices should not be conflated, they are significant dietary trends among youth in contemporary society and have been

treated as such for the purposes of this paper. Indian, and specifically Hindu youth trends in post-apartheid South Africa appear to be marginalized in local youth studies. Further, finding local literature and statistics pertaining directly to Indian youth is equally challenging. The researcher chose to foreground Hindu youth in this paper as an opportunity to contribute towards the discourse on *Indians in South Africa: Perspectives from 1860 to the 21st Century*.

South Africa's Indian population represents the smallest population group in the country, numbering approximately 1,54 million people (Statista 2021) or 2,5% of the overall national population. The Indian community can be culturally divided into four broad groups along linguistic lines: Tamil, Telugu, Hindi and Gujarati. They are divided along the following major religions: Hindu (41,3%), Muslim (24,6%) and Christian (24,4%) (Kumar 2020). Defining 'Hindu youth' numerically is not possible, as the percentage of Hindu youth that constitute the 41,3% of Hindus nationally is not available. However, we do know that they form a small segment of the large 3,47 million youth population that resides in the province of KwaZulu-Natal (StatSA 2019). For this study, the National Youth Policies of 2009, 2015 and 2030, which define young people in South Africa as those aged between 14 and 35 years (NYP 2020–2030), have been adopted.

This paper consists of two key sections. Section A, which focuses on the historical background of vegetarianism and veganism; the South African context; as well as contextualizing the two concepts and contextualizing youth trends. Section B presents the research methodology including the sample, the research questions and findings; followed by the conclusion.

Section A

2 Historical Background

The beginnings of vegetarianism can be traced to the Vedic Period (1700 to 1100 BCE) of Indian history. Concepts such as *samsara* (flowing of the stream of consciousness; the eternal cycle of birth, suffering, death and rebirth), *atman* (self; breath), *karma* (a cycle of rebirths determined by our actions) and *ahimsa* (compassion for all living beings) emerged between the 6th and 8th centuries BCE to influence norms and attitudes at the time and laid the foundation of Indian culture (Sen 2015). Hindu, Jain and Buddhist religious philosophies and practices have significantly influenced and encouraged Western practices of vegetarianism – and eventually veganism – since at least the first centuries BC

onward (Stuart 2006). It was the ancient Jains and their apostle Mahavira, 2 500 years ago who preached an extreme form of non-violence, which involved an elaborate vegetarian code that saw the beginnings of veganism. His contemporary, the Buddha, also decried animal sacrifice and violence, but his pragmatic thinking allowed monks to eat any food put in their alms bowl, including cooked meat. The concept of vegetarianism that originated in India also began influencing dietary practices in the Western World as early as the 4th century BCE.

Greek travellers extolled the austere lifestyles and good health of the ascetics they met in India and developed their own tradition of vegetarianism, called *Pythagorean*, which influenced early Christian thought. Pythagoras was a highly influential thinker and an early follower of this ideology who promoted the idea of the soul; hence all vegetarians in these parts of the world were referred to as Pythagoreans until the 19th century. Vegetarianism on ethical and religious grounds can be traced as far back as the 6th century BCE and was based on the doctrines of metempsychosis or the transmigration of souls. Egyptians were the first to expound transmigration or the belief that the human soul was immortal and upon death was reborn into the body of the same or other living species (Crowley 2016; Sen 2020).

Vegetarianism in 15th century Europe was advocated by Leonardo da Vinci, who believed that there was no distinction between the murder of humans and animals. However, it was only after the spread of Darwin's theory of evolution that vegetarianism gained strength again in the late 18th century and early 19th century. Darwinism refuted the idea that human beings were different from other animals; hence there was no reasonable justification for meat consumption. In this period, certain Christian groups also favoured abstaining from meat based on the belief that animals should also be worthy of pity. It was only then that the term 'vegetarianism' came to be used (Amato & Partridge 1989). Religious practices that preach respect for life and adopt nonviolence principles, such as Hinduism, Jainism, Sikhism, Buddhism, the Hare Krishna movement, and the Seventh-day Adventist Church, were also fundamental to this growth since the mid-20th century (Hargreaves *et al.* 2020). Globally, India is often referred to as the land of Gandhi, spiritualism, and yoga – beliefs and practices closely associated with some form of vegetarianism. Vegetarianism in India has continued to be both a powerful norm and practise, central to a person's claim to high status in the largely caste-based Indian worldview. As a desired attribute of so-called upper caste groups, vegetarian norms are so

desirable that they enforce periodic ritual abstinence even among frequent meat-eaters (Husnain & Srivastava 2018). Although India has the largest population of vegetarians worldwide, the estimated percentage is anywhere between 23% and 37% (Ramesan 2021), it is a predominantly meat-eating nation. Indian history is diverse and complex by nature.

Its historical value systems rooted in religion have led to varied rates of meat consumption, despite the profound changes in Indian society over the last century. Historical factors also feature significantly, sometimes to an even greater extent than religious traditions and this is evident in the distinct regional characteristics of meat consumption, which continues to prevail across India today (Lange 2016). Indians who arrived in South Africa either as indentured labourers or passenger Indians, brought with them cultural norms and practices from the ‘Motherland’, some of which have waned and disappeared over time; some of which were reconfigured in the new context; and some of which were preserved and remain relatively intact. Vegetarianism in South Africa, as in other parts of the Indian diaspora, was no exception and evolved according to the social, economic and political challenges of the new landscape.

3 The South African Context

One of the best-known historical figures and most ardent proponent of vegetarianism and veganism in South Africa, was Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi was a lawyer, founder of the Natal Indian Congress, political prisoner, leader of the Indian community in South Africa, and political activist against the white South African Government and the British Government in India.

Altogether Gandhi spent twenty-nine years in South Africa and during that very formative period he made a return to the religion of his ancestors as he developed a critical appreciation of Hinduism through a deepened knowledge of its religious classics. The Bhagvad Gita (a holy Hindu scriptural text) became for him an infallible guide of conduct. He had come to realize that he must find God by the path of devoted service described in the Gita. The non-attachment to possessions, even to life itself, also enjoined in the Gita gave Gandhi his fearlessness and he became persuaded that to be free to serve without a conflict of duties, he must impose upon himself complete chastity, even within marriage, known to Hindus as the Brahmacharya. Fasting

and restriction in diet now played a more important part in my life'. Having heard of cruel practices to increase the milk yield of cows in Calcutta, he gave up milk. At this time, he found that fresh fruit and nuts provided an ideal diet. As he was making progress in religious awareness and simplicity of life, Gandhi records that his passion for vegetarianism was increasing as was his wish to spread its message. The two communities with which he was closely involved in South Africa – the Phoenix Settlement, and later Tolstoy farm, a meeting place for his followers in Satyagraha (passive resistance), were both vegetarian and he gave support and financial help to vegetarian restaurants. In an address which he gave to the London Vegetarian Society years later in 1931, he advised vegetarians to beware of laying too much stress on any health advantages of their diet, at the expense of revealing its true moral basis (Gandhi 2011).

In an article written by Mistry (1965) it is stated on the ethnic groups of Indians in South Africa (based on 1951 census figures), that although a great majority of Hindus were non-vegetarian, some communities among them such as *Brahmins*, *Patidaars*, *Banias*, etc., especially among Gujarati-speaking Hindus, were mainly lacto-vegetarian by custom. The author also mentions that,

... anthropological characteristics, dietary habits, marriage and other social customs and rituals, economic status, etc. among the ethnic groups differ(ed) considerably from one to the other and so observations based on one or two ethnic groups should not be generalized and considered valid for the Indian population as a whole. This is particularly true for the study of diseases like diabetes mellitus, coronary heart disease, etc., which are known to be affected by heredity, diet and affluence (Mistry 1965:694).

In a study on the history of Gujaratis in South Africa, Vahed (2010: 618) also elaborates that meat was an important marker of identity among Hindus since the late 1890s, implicating both class and caste. In an interview with Dr Desai, a retired professor of Indian languages at University of KwaZulu-Natal, she elaborates how 'these so-called upper caste groups were 100 percent vegetarian. They were more concerned about vegetarianism than the other groups The higher caste also considered themselves more religious ...'.

Gujarati traders regularly returned to India and their cuisine remained relatively intact, while the food of the indentured labourers (who arrived in the 1860s) had changed. The 152 184 labourers who arrived in KwaZulu-Natal were to have an enduring influence in shaping the cuisine and cultural heritage of Durban and South Africa. According to a legal notice from 1874, the labourers were to receive rations of *dholl* (yellow spilt peas), dried fish, oil and rice. Not all promises were kept, however, and the newcomers found themselves in dire conditions. They adapted to the unfamiliar territory and circumstances, as well as to the food. When rice was scarce, dried maize was crushed to create mealie rice (Govender-Ypma 2022). After completing their indenture, many rented land to grow fruit and vegetables for the local market. In 1885, the Wragg-Commission noted that Indians dominated the food produce market. Those who did not turn to the food market, became entrepreneurs and opened stores and hotels, while others made a living through gardening, hawking and fishing. Many workers were forced to re-indenture to avoid tax. Durban became famous for its ‘bunny chow’. This popular takeaway, which is a bread and curry dish, is made by hollowing out the centre portion of the bread, filling it with curry and then capping it with the portion that was cut out.

There are many stories as to how, when and where the popular takeaway originated. One story is that it originated in a ‘*Bania*’ (a name used for the Gujarati speaking people) restaurant, in Grey Street, Durban. Another story states that migrant workers needed to hold their vegetable curries in a form of container and resorted to using their bread to hold their lunch together (SA History Online 2011). It is in such documented histories that elements of a vegetarian diet are suggested. The narratives of older generations also indicate how the consumption of meat was rare in this impoverished indentured community. Fasting in observance of Hindu prayer rituals, cultural festivals and communal traditions also involved abstinence from meat eating. Post-indenture, the predominance of a diet that increasingly included meat in the Indian community became more apparent. Recent literary works such as *Legends of the Tide: The Seine-netters and the roots of the Durban fishing industry* (Govender & Chetty 2014) for instance, traces the beginnings and challenges of the Durban fishing industry from 1865 to the present day. The book foregrounds the early subsistence livelihoods of Indian fisher folk who gave Durban a taste of shad and sardines. This group of fishermen in 1865, chose not to renew their indenture contract and became subsistence fishermen on Salisbury Island (Author Unknown 2018). The history of the Indian community in Durban,

KwaZulu-Natal, illustrates the practice of both vegetarianism and non-vegetarian (meat eating) norms.

4 Contextualizing Vegetarianism and Veganism

Eating is a highly social activity and anthropological research indicates that commensality (the act of eating together and sharing meals) for instance, fulfills a variety of social functions, including strengthening and maintaining relationships and teaching and reinforcing cultural beliefs and values. When people negotiate food choices (within or outside the household) and adopt a diet that varies from the norm, it can affect their social relationships with others. Vegetarianism can be considered a social identity, as it reflects the motivations, feelings, and attitudes of those who choose to adopt it (Rosenfeld & Burrow 2017).

Vegetarianism is a broad term that is inclusive of a diverse and heterogeneous range of dietary practices that refrain from flesh foods (meat, poultry, seafood) and their products. These practices are classified according to how restrictive they are. A vegetarian diet refers specifically to a diet based on vegetables, fruits, grains, nuts, and sometimes egg or dairy products. This food practice has been known for many centuries but the number of consumers following a vegetarian diet and the demand for vegetarian food have recently increased significantly in many countries (Del Campio & Lopes del Campio 2019). Four types of vegetarian diets have been identified by Hargreaves et al (2021), including, flexitarian or semi-vegetarian; pesco-vegetarian or pescatarian; ovolactovegetarian; and strict vegetarianism. A further three sub-classifications of vegetarian diets (raw vegan diet; frugal or frugivorous diet; and macrobiotic diets), are also acknowledged by the authors. Ovo-lacto-vegetarians, for instance, refrain from all types of meat but consume products of animal origin, such as eggs and dairy products, while pescatarians, avoid all meat, except fish and seafood. Vegan diets can be defined as diets avoiding all flesh foods and animal-derived products, whereas vegetarian diets are similar to vegan diets but include eggs (ovo) and/or dairy (lacto) products (Wiebe *et al.* 2016). The vegetarian diet includes plant products and excludes all or some animal foods (mostly meat), whereas the vegan diet is a diet based solely on vegetables, fruit and cereals and excludes all animal-based products (Modlinska *et al.* 2020:1).

Plant-based diets have risen in popularity across the western world,

with vegan restaurants and products experiencing a meteoric rise in sales. Plant-based products appeal to both vegetarians and meat-eaters alike by mimicking the taste, look, and texture of real meat (Johnson 2022). But global meat consumption also continues to increase, with burgeoning urban middle classes across Africa, Asia and Latin America powering the demand. Meat is a resource-intensive protein source (OECD-FAO 2020), and increased demand for meat in developing countries is likely to place even more pressure on an already strained food system. In Western and other cultures where meat and other animal products are traditionally a core component of a meal, a family member or social group that chooses to become vegetarian/vegan, poses an affront to this central aspect of the shared food experience, and may cause others to see their behavior as deviant (Higson 2019). A local study by Sedupane (2017) examined the experiences of Black South African vegetarians from the Rastafarian and Seventh Day Adventists communities in Cape Town. This foremost sociological study on Black South African vegetarians, illustrated that men from this group reported having encountered greater hostility from their families, and greater societal challenges in general, about becoming vegetarian than women did.

5 Contextualizing Youth & Dietary Trends

Socially, culturally and psychologically, youth is regarded as a period when changes in lifestyle and food habits can be influenced in positive or negative directions (Brooks & Begley 2014). Both within and outside of the household (as youth begin to socialize outside the home more often, over longer distances and for longer periods), they are likely to show more independence in decision-making around food. They may consume a greater proportion of food outside the home (for instance, at larger, extended family gatherings, street food and fast food, or meals in institutional canteens) and sites such as schools, gyms, restaurants and workplaces may exert an influence over young people's food choices (Glover & Sumberg 2020).

In South Africa, meat consumption is ranked the 9th-highest globally per capita beef consumption and 11th-highest per capita poultry consumption (OECD-FAO 2021). South Africa has an adult obesity rate of 28% (OECD-FAO 2020) and a high burden of heart disease, so implementing food system solutions that aim to combat these diseases should be a public health priority (Puoane *et al.* 2002). The concurrent problems of (a) high food insecurity and

(b) rising diet-related diseases associated with high meat consumption, both make South Africa an ideal developing country for exploring market pathways to a more healthy, sustainable, and equitable protein supply (Szejda *et al.* 2021). The authors of the study draw a distinction between plant-based meat (food made from plants using proteins such as soy, wheat and pea protein amongst other plant-based components) and cultured meat (laboratory-created meat using the cells of real meat that does not involve the raising and slaughter of animals) in their study, on the familiarity of such products among different generational levels of South African consumers. The study findings suggest that both plant-based and cultivated meat could be viable market-based options for improving the food system in South Africa, as consumers across all segments of society, and especially among the younger population, indicated a broad acceptance (Szejda 2021:2). They found that young people tend to be more eager to adopt emerging technologies and drive change in consumption patterns. As generational cohorts change over time, adoption of plant-based and cultivated meat is therefore highly likely to increase (Stumpe 2022).

In the 20th and 21st centuries, science has observed several health benefits potentially associated with the reduction in meat consumption. Such benefits have strengthened the practice of vegetarianism around the world, and attracted more and more followers (De Souza *et al.* 2017). According to the World Health Organization, conditions such as heart disease and cancer have now superseded infectious diseases such as cholera and measles to become the biggest drain on economies in Africa. Much of the continent is already feeling the effects of the climate crisis, a common reason for reducing meat intake, as more regular and unpredictable droughts and floods wreak havoc for farmers and regularly claim lives. Many of its advocates, however, argue that veganism is not a new trend, it is simply a return to traditional African diets. Interestingly, the African continent is also considered at the helm of some of the challenge's veganism hopes to ease. South Africa is considered to be at the forefront of this movement, with veganism flourishing in Cape Town and Johannesburg (Pujol-Mazzini 2020) and clearly visible in restaurant menus, as well as eateries and markets frequented by young people. According to publishing trends of cookery book sales noted in South Africa, a Euromonitor International report from November 2019 called 'Strategic Themes in Food and Nutrition', indicates that while less than 5% of South Africa's population is vegetarian, around 20% of the population is at least trying to limit their meat intake (Schimke 2020). At this stage, one could claim that while meat consumption in South Africa is on

the increase, there is also a rising interest in a vegan lifestyle and a rising incidence in the consumption of vegetarian and vegan products, particularly among the younger generation.

Section B

6 Research Methodology

Until recently, the researcher, as a social anthropologist, prioritized a predominantly qualitative approach to data collection, engaging participant observation and in-depth interviews as the basis of her research methods, and the use of questionnaires and surveys as supplemental data. However, Covid-19 has thrown a methodological curve-ball to the traditional, in-person methodologies characteristic of ethnographic fieldwork, in which anthropologists pride themselves and know so well. While the fieldwork for this study was conducted towards the end of social distancing protocols in South Africa, the researcher found it more conducive (albeit awkward) to access the student sample involved, by conducting an online questionnaire as the primary methodology instead, using a smaller number of interviews to corroborate and support the findings. Long (2020:3) states ‘... when dealing with a situation as unprecedented as the Covid-19 pandemic, it is surveys, not ethnography, that can best provide a conceptual framework for understanding emergent social realities’. A questionnaire is used in the social sciences as a research instrument that consists of a set of questions that aim to collect information from a respondent. The online questionnaire is typically a mix of close-ended questions and open-ended questions and was administered via an e-mail link. As respondents can answer at leisure and without the pressure to respond immediately, responses may be more accurate. The use of questionnaires in surveys allows for the generating of data most cost-effectively and efficiently (Bihi 2021).

The researcher adopted an emic perspective (studying the behaviour/s of interest through the lens of a member of the culture), and draws upon her positionality as a South African Indian of Hindu heritage, born in KwaZulu-Natal. As an ‘insider’, the researcher had in her lifetime attended a multitude of cultural festivities and social events and engaged in or observed (and overheard) many ad hoc conversations (particularly at Hindu weddings and religious ceremonies where the meals provided are vegetarian), relating to the challenges of families where there was one or a few vegetarian members. Such conversations gave a wealth of insight into the food preparation (separate cooking

utensils and ‘two versions’ of the same meal) and dietary choices across generations, to the extent that over a period of time, it was no longer simple to guess or make assumptions about who was vegetarian in the family, as more nuanced configurations of ‘vegetarian’ became apparent. For instance, a few decades ago, entire households practising vegetarianism was not uncommon in certain segments of the larger Hindu community in KwaZulu-Natal. Gradually this changed and it seemed that it was predominantly the older generation (parents and grandparents) that either continued or adopted vegetarianism (some later on in the life cycle for spiritual or health related reasons). More recently however, the researcher has observed that while the older generation of vegetarians continue this practice, more Hindu youth are beginning to adopt vegetarianism, regardless of their family background. It is no longer uncommon for a vegetarian youth to emerge in a predominantly meat-eating family. While there are neither studies nor statistics to support this claim, it has provided one of the motivations to conduct this study and hopefully encourage future studies hereafter.

7 The Sample

The sample comprised 36 Hindu, South African Indian youth from Durban in KwaZulu-Natal. Most of the youth (50%) belonged to the age group, 20 to 29 years (N=18); 40% belonged to the age group, younger than 20 years (N=14) and 10% belonged to the age group of 30 years and more (N=4). Purposive sampling was adopted for the study and 75% (N=27) of the respondents were selected from a local Hindu Youth Organization for their cultural background, familiarity with vegetarianism and veganism, and exposure to such dietary practices. The remaining 25% of the participants (N=9) were youth known to the researcher, who were interviewed telephonically before participating in the survey. The sample consisted of mainly female respondents (N=26) and significantly fewer male respondents (N=10). The specific dietary preferences of the respondents were estimated at 60% non-vegetarian (N=22); 35% vegetarian (N=12); and 5% pescatarian (N=2).

The pescatarian diet prioritizes fish and seafood as the primary source of protein and almost 3% of people globally have adopted this diet. They share much in common with vegetarians as they eat fruit, vegetable, grains, nuts, seeds, eggs and dairy, but refrain from meat and poultry (Pagan 2021).

The sample also included 2 Hindu youth leaders, who were interview-

ed in person. Interviewee One (DP) is a spiritual leader and youth coordinator in South Africa (Environment Initiative) who also represents youth globally at the United Nations (promoting ethical and spiritual sustainability, in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council of the UN), and the other, Interviewee 2 (PH) was a student leader of a Hindu organization, a SaveSoil (a global environmental movement) ambassador and PhD candidate, based at a local university. The study was conducted between May and July 2022.

8 Research Questions & Findings

The questionnaire was based on seven key questions and comprised two sections. Section one constituted the first five questions, which required of respondents to choose from a list of answers. Comments included by the respondents were assimilated in the findings presented below. Section two comprised the final two questions that required written input from the respondents in the form of explanatory detail. Excerpts of some written responses and a content analysis of the most frequently used words by the youth sample are also included in this latter section. Although what was not the favoured anthropological research technique by the researcher initially, the online questionnaire did yield both quantitative and qualitative data.

8.1 Section One

The most common responses to questions 1 to 5 were the following combination of answers:

Q1. What do you think, from your experiences, is/ are the key influence(s) in someone becoming vegetarian?

Family background, Religion/ Spirituality, Health/ Medical Reasons

The perception of the sample of youth indicated the key influences to becoming vegetarian, was that of family background, religion or spiritual affiliation and health or medical reasons. Belonging to a family who practised vegetarianism was seen to be the foremost reason why youth would follow such a diet. This was closely linked to religious and spiritual values embedded in the family. However, the following comments confirm that youth are also independently adopting vegetarianism and/ or influencing those in their social circle, to adopt vegetarianism:

I am the only vegetarian in my household and it seems like my mother will also become vegetarian soon.

I have been vegetarian for a few years in a family that eats mainly meat. My friends are mostly vegetarian. No one in my immediate family is interested but my late grandparents were very religious and practised vegetarianism. Maybe it skips a generation

I think it's easier to be vegetarian. There are definitely more options available and meat substitutes as well now than when I was growing up. Restaurants also have more inclusive menus for vegetarians. Support from family is beneficial but not the only support anymore.

I think iron deficiency might be something normal for vegetarians (my vegetarian friends seem to have this in common).

Q2. What do you think, from your experiences, is/are the key influence(s) in someone becoming vegan?

Family Background, Health/ Medical Reasons

The sample perceived that it was one's family background that exposed youth to the vegan diet, worldview, and the range of vegan food choices available – this would be unknown to other households where such foods were not considered as important to the daily diet. They also perceived such a decision as 'drastic', motivated (even compelled) by health or medical reasons as a key influence in determining a vegan lifestyle. The excerpts below provide further insight:

I think veganism is popular and has become a trend but it is extreme and not sustainable in poorer countries where economic factors outweigh ethics.

If I wanted to be vegan, it would be a last resort based on medical reasons.

Q3. What do you think is/ are the key reason(s) why people opt for a non-vegetarian diet?

Personal Dietary Preference, More Food Options

The predominantly non-vegetarian sample of Hindu youth understood this as personal dietary choice. They perceived a non-vegetarian diet, to mean having more food options socially (at family gatherings and with peers at restaurants/

takeaways). They also believed that such a diet was far more ‘nutritionally balanced and sustainable’.

It is easier to fit in when your family are mainly meat eaters.

Q4. Among your family/ friends/ colleagues, have you noticed a change in eating preferences in the past 3 years?

Yes (72%)

No (28%)

A significantly large number of the youth (72%) noticed a change in dietary preferences within their familial and larger social circles in the past few years. The influence of climate change is evident in the comment above. A smaller number (28%) were not aware of any noticeable change in diet among family and friends.

The increasing awareness of climate change and how cattle farming is the largest contributor of Nitrogen found in the atmosphere, I do think more people especially youth are favouring meat-free diets and overall healthier lifestyles.

Q5. This change in eating preferences leans more towards ...? (in order of importance):

- Healthier eating for fitness reasons
- Vegetarianism/veganism
- more interest in soya and plant-based products; an interest in eating more vegetable than meat

The aforementioned changes were noted as follows: firstly, that the change was mainly towards eating food that was healthier for fitness reasons (increasing awareness of health problems associated with a predominantly meat-eating diet was noted, as well as an awareness that a balanced diet was preferable among youth who were ‘fitness fanatics’ and involved in regular sporting activities).

This was followed by a noticeable change towards vegetarianism/veganism, specifically where youth had noticed that within their families, a rising interest in ‘eating healthy and ethically’ for both physical and spiritual

reasons, were being adopted more among younger members of the family who cited environmental and animal cruelty as reasons for changing attitudes and, to a lesser extent, a change in interest towards including soya and plant-based products as well as eating more vegetable in one's diet than meat (more family and peer discussions and 'information sharing' about these products were noted). The responses to this question provided was a strong indicator that changes in diet (predominantly towards eating healthier and towards vegetarianism/ veganism) were being considered and adopted among Hindu youth, their families and peers.

8.2 Section Two

The last two questions served a twofold qualitative function, namely to provide brief excerpts which the researcher presents as youth narratives below, as well highlighting the most frequently used words of the respondents.

Q6. What would you consider to be the benefits of a vegetarian/ vegan lifestyle?

- A vegetarian or vegan diet has multiple health benefits. It is widely known that meat or fish or animal products are usually considered unhealthy and are primary causes of cardiovascular diseases in many people. A vegan or vegetarian diet would prevent people from suffering these stated diseases. It is also a good way to lose unwanted body fat or simply keep in shape. Vegan and vegetarian foods are also capable of remaining preserved for longer periods compared to animal-based foods.
- Easier digestion. More vegetables included in diet which leads to an increase in vitamins. No moral dilemma.
- I don't think there are many benefits to be quite honest – I think a balanced diet is healthier than eating veggies and taking a ton of supplements because your diet doesn't offer them – perhaps some people feel more religious, but I feel like the message of why you're supposed to be vegetarian gets lost and people just do it because they think they'll be more blessed?
- Too much meat would be considered unhealthy. A balanced diet is important.
- Emotional and spiritual gratification. Cost-effectiveness (although some

vegetarian/ vegan products are much more expensive than non-vegetarian products, overall it is cheaper if you plan your meals properly). Knowledge (one becomes more informed about alternatives to non-vegetarian products and how many other options can be found if persistently searched for)

- The meat industry also contributes to climate change so living a vegetarian/ vegan lifestyle will help the environment. Many slaughterhouses nowadays inject animals with hormones which are unhealthy for human consumption.
- According to Sanatana Dharma – the eternal truth and teachings of Hinduism – one should always practice *ahimsa* (non-injury). Anyone that leads a vegetarian lifestyle is able to practice this most important quality of *ahimsa*, as outlined in our scriptures, since they not do eat meat and therefore do not contribute to the slaughter of animals for consumption. The practice of non-injury is hugely beneficial for the protection of our animals – it is important that we show love and care to all God's creations – and is also absolutely essential for our spiritual progress. By following a vegetarian/vegan diet, instead of a non-vegetarian diet, our bad karmas will lessen since plants have a lower level of conscious and eating a plant will lead to less bad karma than eating meat since animals have a higher level of consciousness. Vegetarian and vegan foods are considered to be satvic or pure foods because they have high vibrational energies.

The excerpts above indicate a range of differing responses, to the benefits of a vegetarian/vegan lifestyle. The keywords highlighted above (which appeared more than once in the response analysis), indicate the sample's awareness of cultural issues (religious and spiritual factors); health and nutrition aspects (balanced diet and lifestyle diseases); moral/ethical dilemmas (bad karma and slaughter of animals for consumption); economic issues (expensive products) and environmental (climate change) concerns, relating to such a lifestyle.

Interviewee 2 (PH, a student leader) elaborated on animal slaughter for consumption and its influence on our bodies:

Animals are often killed in very traumatic ways and experience much fear and anxiety prior to their death. This fear causes many terrible

toxins to be released into their blood and humans that consume meat then also unknowingly consume these negative toxins which can cause many harmful diseases. What we put into our body should be very carefully scrutinized. Many feel that there are preferences when it comes to diet choices but I believe that this is only due to a lack of knowledge. The fact is that our body is a temple and whatever we put into our body should be absolutely pure. Our body is not made to digest meat and both spiritual teachers and health experts alike have reiterated this.

Q7. What would you consider to be the challenges of a vegetarian/vegan lifestyle?

- Soya prices are quite expensive. There's not much vegan products available and vegetarian/vegan meals aren't always available at restaurants/ take-outs.
- Not enough protein as they have to take supplements. Not much varieties available, personal preferences limit the varieties.
- I personally feel that maintaining a vegan or vegetarian lifestyle tends to be more difficult compared to a non-vegetarian lifestyle because the food items tend to be more expensive and also in a non-vegetarian household it becomes difficult to cater for just one person (vegan/ vegetarian). Many gatherings usually cater non-vegetarian food to provide for the majority of people since the majority of our population are not vegan and vegetarians. This is a disadvantage to the people who are actually vegan or vegetarians and who wish to attend these specific gatherings.
- My family tried eating vegetables for an extended fast and it made us really ill - think if you're not used to eat veggies all the time, it can cause a lot of stomach problems, pain and you may think it's lame or overreacting but it's quite depressing – it feels very restrictive.
- Lack of vitamin B12. Not suitable for anaemic people. Maintaining strong discipline and restraint of the senses.
- Time (not many people have the time to commit to the lifestyle, to research products, to seek out the products, and still be satisfied). Options (one who has not really searched for alternatives, etc. may feel that there are not many options available and this, I feel, is the main challenge towards adopting the lifestyle). Influence (social influence,

among others, play a key role in the type of lifestyle may people adopt, and sometimes having a vegetarian or vegan lifestyle leads to social exclusion, etc.).

- Pressure from other people who do not take your lifestyle seriously. Those following vegetarian and vegan diets are constantly on the receiving end of negative attitudes and have to really have strong conviction in their diet because others around them will constantly question them, comment on their diet and sometimes try to convince them eat meat. Ignorance and mis-information are big challenges that prevent more individuals from adopting vegetarian/vegan diets. Even when a certain individual wants to adopt this diet, their family members or peers may discourage and question them based on the misconceptions that they have for these types of diets. This is very sad.
- There should be more healthier options for meat meals. Many meats are processed. Vegetables are good for your health and the farming industry and local economic growth. People should have a balanced diet of healthy meats and vegetables to prevent health issues. There should be more variety and not just soya. I will not have strength in the gym if I did not eat a lot of protein from meat.

The youth responses to the challenges of a vegetarian/vegan lifestyle, indicated relevant social aspects (citing discipline and restraint; catering at gatherings; social exclusion; external pressure; negative attitudes; misconceptions and misinformation as negative variables); economic factors (expensive lifestyle; lack of food options; farming and local economic growth); and nutritional issues (fasting is difficult; additional supplements; strength to exercise requires a diet with meat). The social pressures of becoming vegetarian/vegan is strongly indicated in the keyword responses and the excerpts present these challenges on both practical and emotional levels. More negative connotations associated with the challenges of such a lifestyle were indicated in the youth responses. Sedupane (2017:46) aptly states:

People make a conscious decision to become vegetarians prompted by different motives, from health to animal welfare and even religion. Beyond it being a dietary practice vegetarianism forms part of one's identity and worldview. Since this worldview is not shared by the larger society, vegetarians face a lot of opposition from significant

others and society at large in developing and maintain their identity. However, vegetarians arm themselves with knowledge in order to grow in their identity as well as to be able to defend it.

Choosing to be vegetarian/vegan can be likened to the pattern of stigmatized individuals in Goffman's (1963) interpretation of social deviance theory, where he asserts that such individuals are likely to become accustomed to social tensions because of their identity and develop ways of coping, in this instance, by engaging in open communication with others about their diet and lifestyle (Lindquist 2013). An excerpt from Interviewee 1 (DP, spiritual youth leader), elaborates how youth vegans in particular are taking a firm stance as food and environmental activists:

Youth leaders have become activists in promoting veganism. They advocate for change, strongly condemning animal slaughter in the food chain and destruction of the environment by mankind. Globally, they are leading by example and their voices are impactful. In South Africa, there are far fewer ambassadors but the awareness for change is growing

9 Conclusion

The aim of this study was to provide some insight into contemporary youth perceptions of vegetarianism/veganism among a sample of Hindu youth in Durban, KwaZulu-Natal. Local historical data and sociological studies on Indian youth are lacking and what is available, tends to subsume youth and generational differences within larger household and family dynamics. The study attempted to examine dietary choices among Indians in Durban historically (since their arrival from India as indentured labourers in 1860), as well as more recent trends relating to vegetarianism and veganism among Hindu youth. The following perceptions were made apparent by the study:

1. They perceived family background, religion/spirituality and health or medical reasons as the key determinants in a youth's motivation for adopting a vegetarian diet. While family background was considered a primary influence, youth also elaborated that they were also becoming vegetarian on their own accord (independently of their family history).

2. They perceived the motivations to become vegan, as being based specifically on family background and health or medical reasons. Youth narratives indicated this decision as drastic.
3. They understood being non-vegetarian/meat eating in diet as a personal choice influenced by practical reasons such as convenience in social gatherings, more food options and a more balanced diet.
4. Most youth have witnessed a distinct change in food preferences and diet in the past few years towards eating healthy for nutritional purposes, towards vegetarianism/ veganism and including more alternative products (soya and plant-based) so that more vegetable products (than meat) were included.
5. The youth related the benefits of a vegetarian/vegan diet to the following keywords: multiple health benefits; weight loss; easier digestion; emotional and spiritual well-being; cost effectiveness; helping the environment; ahimsa; high vibrational energy.
6. The youth related the challenges of a vegetarian/vegan diet to the following keywords: expensive; not sustainable; not many options; need to supplement with vitamins; discipline; social exclusion; negative attitudes; misinformation

While a large portion of the youth sample followed a meat-eating diet, a significant component of the sample practised a vegetarian diet. The findings suggest that while meat eating was the dominant dietary choice among Hindu youth in Durban, vegetarian/vegan and non-meat food product alternatives were increasing in popularity and were increasingly considered in the food preferences of the sample, particularly for reasons relating to health, spirituality and ethics. Overall, the youth indicated considerable awareness of the benefits of a vegetarian diet (socially, spiritually and nutritionally) as well as the challenges of adopting a vegan lifestyle, which they considered admirable, yet expensive and extreme. They also indicated that family history and background were no longer the main variable motivating a shift to a vegetarian/vegan diet among young people. While these findings indicate a notable change in awareness and practice relating to food choices among the youth, they cannot be generalized to Hindu youth in KwaZulu-Natal, nor South Africa. As studies on Indian youth in South Africa are scarce and Hindu youth even more rare, the study is meant to contribute towards the discourse on South African Indian youth and food.

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