

AN INTRODUCTION TO THE CONCEPT OF VEGETARIANISM AMONG HINDUS IN MALAYSIA

By

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Introduction

The objective of this article is to provide an introduction to the concept of Vegetarianism among Hindus in Malaysia. According to Malaysian population census of 2000, Malaysian population is 23.27 million, of which 7.7% are Indians and out of this 7.7%, 81.8% of Indians are practising Hindus.

The majority (60.4%) of the country are of Islamic faith. Buddhists make up about 19.2%, Christians about 9.1%, Hindus about 6.3% and the other 2.9% of the population is composed of followers of other faiths including Daoism, Confucianism and Shamanism.

About 80 percent of Indian immigrants to Malaya were Hindus especially from South India. During the British colonial period in late 18th century and early 19th century, Indians migrated to Malaya as labourers bringing along Hindu practices and beliefs. Since then the Hindu religious values and belief system have been an influencing factor.

Hinduism is known as an important marginal religion in Malaysia through the influence of Indian migration during the British period in the late 18th Century during the acquisition of the Straits Settlements (Penang, Malacca, Singapore) and with the expansion of British rule over the Peninsular Malaya which resulted in the expansion of agriculture and the demand for cheap and submissive labour which continued till the eve of Second World War.

After the Second World War, Hindus practiced Hinduism by building temples in rural and urban areas. Messages on religions and rituals were spread throughout the world through temples. At the same time saints from various countries especially from India started preaching Hinduism to Hindus. It started off with a small group of people spreading the practice of Hinduism and this group has grown into big organizations such as the *Saiva Siddhanta mandram* and many others.

Methodology

This article is based on experimental sampling known as a 'snow ball' method from the perspective of Bailey K.D. that is done stage by stage. During the first stage, the researcher had chosen respondents, who had important criteria such as being Hindu temple chairman, Hindu priest, and President or Chairman Hindu organizations. Through these key informants, the researcher went to second groups of respondents who were members of working committees of Hindu temples and Hindu organisations. The third group of informants was the members of Hindu temple organisations and Hindu temple devotees. The researcher interviewed 100 respondents for sampling throughout Selangor State and Federal Territory (Kuala Lumpur).

Definition

Vegetarianism is a practice of abstaining from eating meat, fish or their by-products including lard, gelatin, rennet and other related animal products. In fact there are some vegetarians who refrain from even wearing products made of animal materials such as leather, silk or fur. It is further known that many vegetarians abstain from all animal by-products with some making exceptions in their diet and attire. Some vegetarians consume dairy and egg products; a stricter form of vegetarianism known as veganism is to abstain from taking dairy products; and a much stricter one is fruitarianism, which excludes all food other than botanic fruits from plants.

Respondents also explained that vegetarianism is known as *Shaakaahaara* in Sanskrit, and one who is following a vegetarian diet is a *shaakaahaari*. Meat-eaters are known as *maamsaahaari* and the term for meat eating is *mansaahaara*. The term to consume or eat food is known as *Aahaara* and vegetable is known *Shaaka*. Meat/flesh is called *maamsa*.

Malaysian Hindu Practices of Vegetarianism

Hindus during the migration period brought along with them the Hindu belief system and practices. Since then the vegetarian concept has been practiced as part of their daily life, life cycle ceremonies, Hindu fasting and festival, ethic and spiritual life. Practices of vegetarianism among Hindus in Malaysia have increased and have created awareness through religious institutions such as Hindu temples and religious organizations.

Majority of Hindus in Malaysia are practicing *Saivism* which emphasizes on *Saiva Siddhanta* philosophy as expounded by religious organizations such as *Arulneri Tirukootam*, Malaysia Hindu Sangam, *Saiva Siddhanta mandram* and other organizations. There are organizations based on *Vedantic* philosophy such as Divine Life Society, International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON), Ramakrishna Mission and other organizations.

The *Saivites* and *Vaisnavites* are followers of the concept of non-violence (*ahimsa*) preaching about vegetarianism.

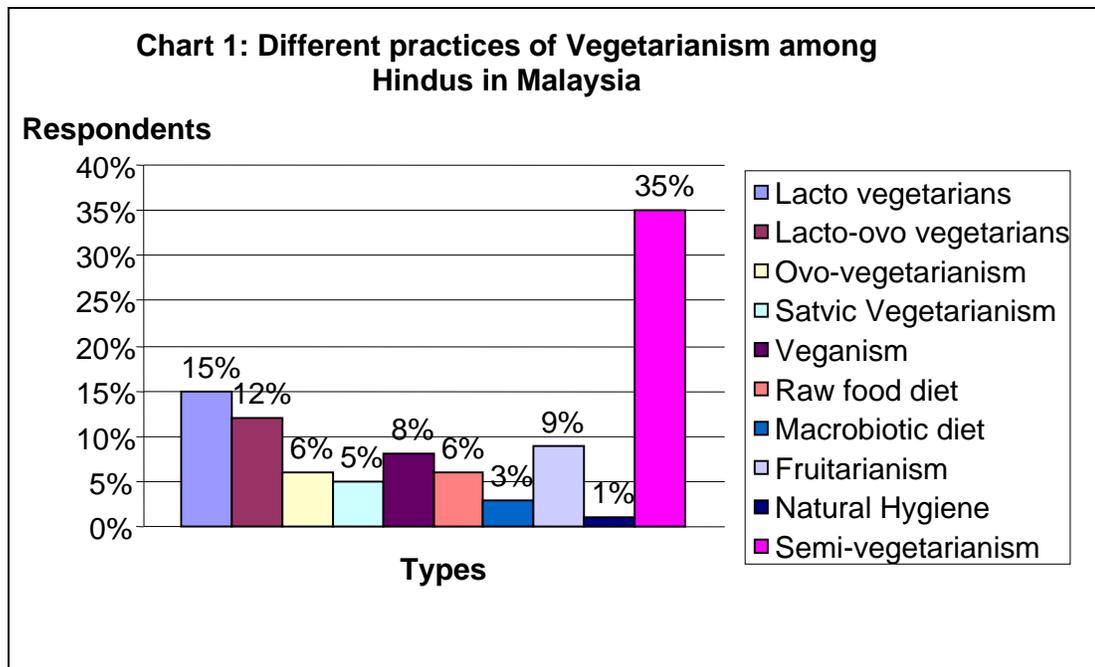
Although the Tamil educated Hindus do not have deeper knowledge of *Saiva Siddhanta* and *Vedanda* philosophy, they follow the Tamil ethical proverbs in Tamil *Tirukkural* as a way of life. They believe in *Kollaamai* which means avoidance of killing and practice vegetarianism.

According to respondents, Hindus that belong to Brahmin caste, *pandaaram* caste and *Saiva Vellaalar* caste (such as *Saiva Mudaliars* and *Pillais*), consume meat and also occasionally practise vegetarianism as it is part of their tradition whereas the majority of the younger generation of *Saiva Vellaalars* in Malaysia do not practise vegetarianism.

Different Practices of Vegetarianism

Practice of vegetarianism is frequently associated with the attainment of *purity*. Purity here means the condition of a person's mind and the desire to abstain from consuming meat.

Based on research, the researcher is able to categorize the practice of vegetarianism among Hindus in Malaysia as follows:



Source: Data collected from interview held throughout Selangor State and Federal Territory (Kuala Lumpur), 2005.

- a) **Lacto vegetarians**
Lacto vegetarians do not consume meat and eggs. Their diet consists of fruit and vegetables and dairy products (vegetarian cheese only);
- b) **Lacto-ovo vegetarians**
Lacto-ovo vegetarians do not consume meat but consume dairy products and eggs. Generally this form of vegetarianism is practiced.

- c) **Ovo-vegetarianism**
Ovo-vegetarian does not consume meat or dairy products but consumes eggs.
- d) **Satvic Vegetarianism**
Satvic vegetarianism prohibits consumption of onion, garlic, meat, dairy products and eggs. Satvic vegetarians believe that onions and garlic's are *tamasic* and *rajasic* food as it causes a disturbance, and even pain and sickness to those who eat them.
- e) **Veganism**
Veganism avoids consumption of animal products including dairy products, eggs and sometimes honey.

The following are less common practices of vegetarianism:

- f) **Raw food diet**
Foods that are not cooked are consumed.
- g) **Macrobiotic diet**
Consists of only grains and beans and is usually spiritually based, like fruitarianism.
- h) **Natural Hygiene**
Involves a diet principally of raw/uncooked foods.
- i) **Fruitarianism**
Consists of only botanic fruits from plants, nuts, and seeds.

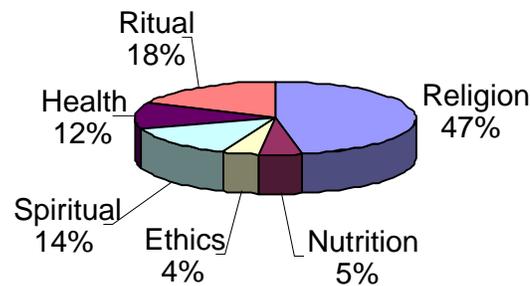
The following are not considered full vegetarianism:

- j) **Semi/partial vegetarianism**
These groups of people avoid consuming certain types of meat for some reasons that others choose vegetarianism, for example health and ethical beliefs. Some follow a diet that is mostly vegetarian but occasionally consume meat. Some practice vegetarianism during Hindu fasting and festivals period, special home prayers, some life cycle ceremonies such as wedding, naming ceremony, house warming ceremony, funeral and certain auspicious days based on Hindu Almanac.

Factors that influence the concept of being a vegetarian among Hindus in Malaysia

Based on analysis, the researcher is able to categorize the various factors that influence the concept of Vegetarianism among Hindus in Malaysia. The factors are religion, Hindu rituals and ceremonies, spiritual, health, nutrition and ethical beliefs.

Chart 2: Influential factors of being Vegetarianism



Source: Data collected from interview held throughout Selangor State and Federal Territory (Kuala Lumpur), 2005.

Hindu Religious Concept

Based on the chart, majority (47%) of respondents emphasized that the religious knowledge and awareness are the influencing factors of being a vegetarian. The respondents explained that they practice Vegetarianism for religious reasons as they believe that food shapes the personality, mood and mind.

According to respondents, meat creates aggressiveness and an unstable mind known as *Rajasic* whereas a vegetarian diet promotes *Satvic* qualities by calming the mind and leads the way for spiritual progress. By practising vegetarianism it elevates an individual toward *Satvic* qualities. It will alleviate a person to works towards the welfare of humanities whereby they are hardworking, alert, speak the truth and are bold, do not use insulting language, are not affected by greed and selfishness, possess good memory power, interest in spiritual knowledge and spend time worshipping god or meditating.

According to respondents, the principle of *Ahimsa* (non-violence) compels one to refrain from injuring any living creature, physically, mentally or emotionally. *Ahimsa* is the basis for spiritualism. It aims at purity and balance. Thus, *ahimsa* and vegetarianism are inter-connected.

According to a spiritual master from a religious organization, "*Ahimsa* and vegetarianism are the basic concepts of *Vaidika Sanaathana Dharma*. *Ahimsa* is the primary equipment for spiritualism: *Ahimsa Paramo Dharma*. Thus *ahimsa* and vegetarianism are inseparably connected with the *Sanaathana Dharma*. Also consider the selfless service, the vegetable world is rendering. The *Sanaathana* concept prohibits taking food for selfish reasons. When an animal is slaughtered for human selfishness, it would become a poisonous

food. In this context the principle of *Ahimsa* (non-violence) will be the best form of practise”.

Some respondents from the religious organizations explain that as taught by India's saints and philosophers, life is observed as a godly object and one should lead life in a divine manner. In order to be divine, one should not practice violence such as killing animals and consuming it, and lose one's divinity.

Vegetarianism is taught to the Hindus as a way of life. According to respondents, the meat-eater's desire to consume meat forces someone to slaughter and offer that meat. Meat eating contributes to a mindset of aggression. When an individual's awareness increases, that individual will hate cruelty and soon dislike consuming meat. Most saints in India prove that one cannot eat meat and live a non-violent and pleasant life.

According to respondents, the reasons for practising vegetarianism are due to the belief in the Law of Karma. They believe that animals have souls and killing animals have *karmic* repercussions that will lead to reincarnation.

Nutrition

Some respondents (5%) gave explanations that they practice Vegetarianism for religious reasons as well as nutritional purpose. They believe that a diet rich in fresh fruits and vegetables but low in animal fat and red meat offers several benefits to the health including a lower risk of heart disease, cancer, renal failure, stroke and obesity. Some of the respondents mention that Vegetarianism provides a number of nutritional benefits, including lower levels of saturated fat, cholesterol, and animal protein as well as higher levels of carbohydrates, fiber, magnesium, potassium, folate, and antioxidants such as vitamins C and E and phytochemicals. Vegetarians have been classified to have lower body mass indices (BMI) and lower rate in death from heart disease than meat eaters. Respondents explain that one should eat a more balanced nutrition diet.

Ethics

The respondents (4%) explain that they practice vegetariansim due to ethical reasons. They say that vegetarians consider slaughtering and consumption of meat or animal products as unethical. The reasons vary according to individuals and their belief system. All living creatures are respected by Hindus because of their compassion and ethical concern, regardless of whether they are human or non-human.

A maxim of the *Tirukkural* questions 'how can one practice true love when he consumes the flesh of an animal to build up his own flesh'.

The respondents mention that it is proven and obvious that vegetarian families have lesser problems than meat eaters. As for those children who are raised as vegetarians, even though they are exposed to non-vegetarian practices, the thought of harming a creature or human being will not occur in their mind.

Environment

Some respondents claim that they became vegetarians due to environmental effect. They explain that environmental vegetarianism is the belief that the production of meat and their by-products now or in future are environmentally unsustainable. Industrialization has led to intensive farming practices and diets high in animal protein, primarily in developed nations. One of the respondents has referred to the statement of the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) that "Most of the world's population today subsists on vegetarian or near-vegetarian diets for reasons that are economic, philosophical, religious, cultural, or ecological." Thus, the main protest of environmental vegetarians is primarily against intensive farming in developed nations.

These respondents feel that planet earth is afflicted on a large scale. The loss of species, demolition of forests, loss of topsoils and the consequential rise of water contamination and air pollution is due to the factor of meat in the human diet. In order to save the planet earth, individuals have to make a decision of not eating meat in order to improve our planetary ecology. Those who have decided to become vegetarians have this environmental effect in their mind not only for now but for the future as well.

Spiritual aspect

There are some respondents (14%) who emphasise Mahatma Gandhi's conception of spiritual awareness and his experiences on being a vegetarian. Most of them claim this spiritual motivation as a New Age cause for being vegetarian.

The respondents feel that the kind of food consumed affects the awareness, feeling and experiential patterns. If someone wants to live in an elevated awareness, peacefully, happily and shower love not only on mankind but also on other creatures, that person will abstain from eating meat. The body chemistry reacts differently once meat is consumed such as creating anger, fear, jealousy, anxiety and suspicion. These are the reasons why vegetarians live in an elevated awareness whereas meat eaters live in an inferior awareness.

Certain respondents believe that vegetarianism helps an individual to explore deeper levels of consciousness, find inner peace and establish a connection with the Divine through practice of meditation and yoga.

Health

There are respondents (12%) who mentioned that medical research has proven that a vegetarian diet is easier to be absorbed and it gives a better range of nutrients and inflict less problem on the body. Vegetarians are less prone to major illness or diseases and thus live longer, healthier and have a more productive lifestyle.

Research by scientists has yet to prove that by forgoing the idea of meat eating can contribute to longlife expectancy. It has been long proven in science that smoking and consumption of alcohol have effect on health and longevity.

Rituals

As shown in our chart, the second major group respondents are those (18%) who practise vegetarianism during certain Hindu festivals and fasting period. Throughout the year, there are festivals encouraged to be observed based on Hindu Almanac. During these major festivals such as Deepavali, Pongal, Chitra Purnami, Vinayagar Chathurti, Aadi Perukku, Navaraathri, Hindu New Year, Thaipusam, Kaartikkai Deepam, Vaikaasi Visaakam and Panguni Uttiram as well as House warming ceremony and Life cycle ceremonies (18 *samskaras* such as birth, naming of the child, shaving of hair on head, piercing of the ear, puberty, marriage, advanced stage of pregnancy and death and many others), depending on the type of festivals, Hindus observe vegetarianism either twice or three days in a week, one week, nine days or even one month. The respondents also mention that certain people practice fasting (some do not consume food or water, some only consume milk and fruits, some only consume one meal a day) during Kanda Sashti Kavasam, Sivarathri, Vaikunda Yegathasi and Prathosham. These forms of vegetarianism are mostly practiced by the semi/partial vegetarians.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, it would seem clear that there are different types of vegetarian practices among Hindus in Malaysia. These practices of vegetarianism are influenced by various factors such as religion, nutrition, ethics, environment, spiritual needs, health and rituals. To be a vegetarian and to understand the concept of vegetarianism is not a difficult task among Hindus in Malaysia since vegetarianism has been preached and practiced since childhood; yet there is less awareness among Hindus in Malaysia to be a full-time vegetarian.

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