

## Research Paper

# **My Vegetarian Experience: An Autoethnographic Approach**

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**Abstract:** Food consumption around the world makes up the basis of human ecology as we eat foods based on our cultural, religious and moral beliefs. Ethical and spiritual concerns have motivated many Greek philosophers like Pythagoras, Plato, Plutarch, and Porphyry to abstain from meat consumption. There has been an increase in the meat abstinence and vegetarian lifestyle due to recent philosophical world views put forth for anti-speciesism, anti-carnism, ethical issues about killing of animals, animal rights, and communal feeling and identification with the animal world. Scientific arguments for the benefits of a vegetarian lifestyle and diet are quite recent. Vegetarianism as a lifestyle is difficult to quantify and study, primarily because there are so many interpretations of the word “vegetarian”. This confusion on the term “vegetarian” has presented problems for empirical research. There has been a lot of research with regard to motivations of people turning vegetarian; from environmental concerns, ethical concerns, religious concerns, animal rights concerns and health but little to no research on the experience of being a religious vegetarian. The motivation to understand the experiences of a Hindu religious lacto-vegetarian in a predominantly meat-eating society prompted me to undertake this study. For this purpose, I became a vegetarian for a month and noted down my experiences in an autoethnographical study. I discovered how my culture, my reflexivity and my past life experiences influence who I am and how I choose my food. The loneliness and fears that I faced during the study will also be discussed. The second reason for this research was to understand and experience the challenges of autoethnography as a research methodology and to try to legitimise it as a credible genre of scholarly work.

**Keywords:** Autoethnography, Hinduism, vegetarianism, cultural food habits, lacto-vegetarianism

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## Introduction

Food consumption around the world makes up the basis of human ecology. We all eat different foods around the world based on our cultural, religious and moral beliefs. Ethical and spiritual concerns have motivated many Greek philosophers like Pythagoras, Plato, Plutarch, and Porphyry to abstain from meat consumption (Spencer, 1993). The meat abstinence and vegetarian lifestyle has picked up in the western world over the last century. This is caused by recent philosophical perspectives put forth for anti-speciesism (Singer, 1976), anti-carnism (Joy, 2010), ethical issues about killing of animals (Rozin, 2004; Twigg, 1979), animal rights (Regan, 1984), and a feeling of community and identity with the animal world (Clark, 1984). The scientific arguments for the benefits of a vegetarian lifestyle and diet are quite recent (Whorton, 1994). Vegetarianism as a lifestyle is quite hard to quantify and study, primarily because there are so many interpretations of the word vegetarian. There are self-identified vegetarians who abstain completely from any animal product; others take milk and milk products, eat egg, eat fish or eat white meat. All of them claim to be a vegetarian of some sort. The confusion on the term “vegetarian” has presented problems for empirical research (Weinsier, 2000). According to many polls around the world, it is estimated that 3% of the UK population are vegetarians (UK Food Standards Agency, 2009), 1–2% in New Zealand (Bidwell & Alexander, 2002), and 3% in Australia, with quite high rates of 6% in Ireland, 9% in Germany, 8.5% in Israel, and 40% in India (“How many veggies...?”, 2008). There has been a lot of research with regard to motivations of people turning vegetarian; from environmental concerns (Gupta, 1999; Beardsworth & Keil, 1992; Fox & Ward, 2008), ethical concerns (Ruby, 2012; Beardsworth & Keil, 1992; Fox & Ward, 2008), religious concerns (Nath, 2010; Beardsworth & Keil, 1992), animal rights concerns (Beardsworth & Keil, 1992) and health (Ruby, 2012; Fox & Ward, 2008; Beardsworth & Keil, 1992) but little to no research on the experience of a religious vegetarian. My motivation to understand the experiences of a vegetarian in a predominantly meat-eating society in Klang Valley, Malaysia prompted me to undertake this research. For this purpose, I became a vegetarian for a month and noted down my experiences in an autoethnographical study. Malaysia does have a sizeable Indian population which is made up of an eclectic mix of Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Sikh populace. They eat a variety of Indian foods from meat, fish, seafood, chicken and vegetarian fare. The cooking styles are even more varied from coconut and seafood-heavy South Indian fare to breads and roasted meat of north Indian to the oily and fatty Indian Muslim curries. The availability of mock meats which are predominantly prevalent in the Chinese cuisine in Malaysia are also included in the realm of vegetarian food but is not considered or accepted widely in the vegetarian Hindu community.

My other motivation for this research is that I am a Hindi meat-consuming man married into a predominantly Hindu vegetarian family. Vegetarian meals on a regular basis were also a part my life before marriage as we had many regular days where we shunned meat and alcohol due to religious reasons. Eating vegetarian foods for long periods of time is therefore not overly stressful to me. The problem arises when there is a lack of foods that my family and I consider as “pure-veg”. My reflexivity in accepting vegetarian foods in a predominantly non-vegetarian restaurant is also different from my family who would not even have an Indian bread (*roti*) that has been broiled on a pan where a similar egg-filled bread (*roti telur*) was cooked. For this study, I put myself in my wife’s frame of mind while choosing vegetarian dishes and meals during the course of research period. As there are no studies on the religious vegetarian experiences in a high-meat consumption country, this research is unique and innovative as it lays the path for future researchers to understand and further advance the religious vegetarian’s behaviour outside their comfort zone.

### Literature Review

The choice for vegetarian food and meat abstinence has been steadily increasing across the world. In his book, *The Bloodless Revolution: A Cultural History of Vegetarianism from 1600 to Modern Times*, Stuart (2006) mentions that vegetarianism has its roots in ancient India. Indeed, presently most the world’s vegetarians are Indians and there are more vegetarians in India than in any other country in the world (Stuart, 2006). International and local brands have customised their products to suit the Indian diaspora who want to consume western favourites like burgers and pizzas but still follow their vegetarian lifestyle. Some major brands have overhauled their entire concept to suit local tastes. Kentucky Fried Chicken (KFC), which is synonymous with its “finger-lickin good” tagline, altered it for India to “So veg, So good” to promote its paneer zinger burger and veg twister at the beginning of 2014. The change was implemented because they saw a huge potential in the vegetarian customers who make up the bulk of the Indian population. Since then, the fast-food chain’s sale of its vegetarian items in the country has shot up significantly (Bhushan, 2014). A recent survey on pizza sales by food delivery portal, foodpanda.in showed that a large portion of pizzas sold in Delhi are vegetarian (Bhushan, 2014). A change in vegetarian food consumption can be seen in many parts of the world with trends of vegan, gluten-free and healthy vegetarians increasing as vegetarianism becomes more glamorous. The world’s biggest fast-food chain, McDonald’s bestseller product in the Indian market is the McAllu Tikki Burger (potato patty) in spite of other innovative and interesting chicken and egg preparations (Bhushan, 2014). The latest trend predicted for 2015 in America is that restaurants and hotels will serve at least one vegetarian dish for every meal, especially those with an international clientele as guests increasingly become more health, ethical, environmental and religiously

conscious (Simon, 2014). The American fast-food chain White Castle, has started offering vegetarian sliders to its customers since December 2014. According to its Vice President, James Richardson, the 93-year-old company was committed to “keeping up with changing tastes” (Press, 2014). According to a survey in UK, it was estimated that vegetarians and vegans now make up 3.7% of the adult population (Social Surveys Gallup, 1990). This is an increase of 23% since the previous survey in 1988. It is also a 76% increase since the first survey in 1984. The survey also shows that an additional 6.3% avoid red meat and its products from their daily diet. This is also an increase of 15% from the 1988 survey and a whopping 232% increase from the 1984 survey. The survey also revealed that the combined number of vegetarians and those avoiding meat made up 10% of the total population of UK. The survey also showed that women in the 16-24 age brackets have the highest tendency to eat a meat-free diet. They were also more concerned about the financial, ethical, moral and health aspects of meat consumption. For those who avoid meat products, the upper socio-economic group cited health reasons while the lower socio-economic group stated financial reasons (Beardsworth & Keil, 1991).

There are many reasons for becoming vegetarian ranging from ethical, health, ecological, religious, financial to philosophical reasons (Leitzmann & Hahn, 1996; Messina & Burke, 1997; Key, Davey & Appleby, 1999; Rajaram & Sabaté, 2000). If we look at the ecological/environmental effects of food production, the damage done by the meat production industry is startling (Giehl, 1981). The average meat protein production requirements are 10 times more in terms of land requirements compared to plant protein. More than a third of the world’s grain harvest is used to feed the animals needed for meat production. Just a fifth of this grain would be enough to feed all the hungry people in the world (Leitzmann, 2003). In addition, the animals’ waste and manure seeps into the soil causing high levels of potentially carcinogenic nitrates in potable drinking water and vegetables grown in and around the animal farms. The meat production industry requires a lot of electricity, fossil fuel and other forms of resources like water and also leads to overgrazing of land and deforestation to make way for more farmland (Pimentel & Pimentel, 1983; Pimentel, 1999; Pinstrip-Andersen & Pandya-Lorch, 1998).

Many social anthropologists have analysed in detail the high value placed on meat by human societies (Harris, 1986; Farb & Armelagos, 1981). The founding of the Vegetarian Society in 1847 in UK was an important step in the emergence of vegetarianism as a new social movement (Dietz et al., 1995). Vegetarianism is the opposite of the conventional food hierarchy models with red meat at the top, exuding power and vegetables as the undesirables at the bottom (Twigg, 1979a; 1979b). Modern vegetarianism is divided into many categories from the very strict vegans to the ovo-vegetarians who consume milk and eggs to “pseudo-vegetarian” or also known as “semi-vegetarian” like pescatarian vegetarians who

consume occasional fish and crustaceans but shun farmed meats (Beardsworth & Keil, 1992).

In the last 50 years, we have seen a long-term decline in red meat consumption since the early 1960s along with pork and pork product consumption since the early 1980s. Poultry consumption on the other hand, seems to have risen progressively since the mid-1950s (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997). According to a research by the Institute of Food Research in Reading, it was observed that nearly a third of its sample of 1,018 UK residents considered themselves as reducing their meat consumption (Richardson, Shepherd & Elliman, 1993).

According to a survey by the Vegetarian Society in 1991 in UK, it was also observed that the female respondents indicated a higher rate of vegetarianism compared to that of the males (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997). Another survey in the US showed that there were 3% to 7% vegetarians in the USA (Beardsworth & Keil, 1997). Similarly, in a survey in Fairfax County, Virginia, it was found that people who turned vegetarian had higher “altruistic or philanthropic” values compared to non-vegetarians who portrayed higher “traditional or conventional values” (Dietz et al., 1995). Many other research (Beardsworth & Keil, 1992; Neale, Tilston, Gregson & Stagg, 1993; Santos & Booth, 1996; Mauren, 1995) also suggest that the motives for a person to convert to vegetarianism are basically ethical considerations rather than the usual taste, health or ecological reasons.

The Hindu vegetarians are basically lacto-vegetarians (Dugan, 1994), which means they consume milk and milk products along with a plant-based diet. Milk, butter, Indian fresh cheese (*paneer*) is considered to be an integral part of their vegetarian lifestyle and is in fact, seen as the highest and purest form of vegetarianism. Vegetarianism in Hinduism entails eating Satwik food which is pure vegetarian in nature with an emphasis on milk and milk by-products like butter and ghee. Milk fat (ghee) is used to light the ceremonial lamp in all Indian homes and temples and sweets made out of milk are offered to gods as a homage after which the same are distributed between family members and children (Symmons, 1998).

### **Methodology**

Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) one’s personal experience (auto) in order to understand a cultural experience (ethno) (Ellis, 2004; Jones, 2005). The criteria for the evaluation of personal writing as sociology is still relatively very new and has just started developing (DeVault, 1997). The personal descriptions in many cases may simply be rejected as self-indulgent in the absence of alternative ideas on how to go about appraising them (Atkinson, 1997; DeVault, 1997; Sparkes, 2002).

Duncan (2004) informed and warned budding autoethnographers against emotional writing styles, lacking personal motivations about the motivators behind the research,

and a failure to connect your personal experiences with the theory. Her advice is that we need to deal openly with the validity, reliability, and legitimation of autoethnography within the prevailing research culture around the world. For this research, I plan to analysis my personal experiences of being a vegetarian whilst living in a predominantly meat-eating society in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. This study is a precursor to a wider study which I have undertaken to investigate the food consumption trends of religious vegetarian tourists while on holiday. By analysing myself in the Hindu vegetarian cultural set-up, I strive to understand the experience of Hindu religious vegetarians when they are outside their comfort zone and need to make food choices on a daily basis. Autoethnographies “are highly personalized accounts that draw upon the experience of the author/researcher for the purposes of extending sociological understanding” (Sparkes, 2000, p. 21). Autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on auto- (self), -ethno- (sociocultural connection), and -graphy (application of the research process) (Reed-Danahay, 1997). While many consider autoethnography to be a personal narrative (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), other researchers use autoethnography as a way to link the literary concepts with the personal experiences of the researcher (Holt, 2001; Sparkes, 1996). These researchers also support this approach as rigorous and justifiable as any other forms of inquiry (Duncan, 2004).

Autoethnography can be considered as more of a philosophy than a well-defined method (Wall, 2006), so there remains a considerable creative latitude in the production of an autoethnographic text (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The examples of autoethnography show that it is used mainly as a storytelling method which builds a personal connection of the reader with the researcher (Frank, 2000). It also explores issues of personal importance within an explicitly acknowledged social context (Holt, 2001; Sparkes, 1996), evaluating a person’s actions (Duncan, 2004), or critiquing existing literature on a topic of personal importance (Muncey, 2005). The autoethnographic form of writing would allow my readers to feel my dilemmas, think with my story rather than about it and join actively with my decision points (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). I plan to become a co-participant who engages with the storyline morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually (Richardson, 1994).

While undertaking this autoethnographic study, I had to understand that in order to write it, one cannot feel completely at home in our discipline (Burnier, 2006) as this could hamper my observation of the glaring truth right in front of me. The discomfort I experienced while stepping outside my own perceived frame of mind was part of the autoethnographic task (Denshire, 2014).

Telling a story in the first-person perspective can run the risk of too much attachment to self and a certain set of memories (Denshire, 2014). While this can be a problem because we may be seen as being too self-indulgent, we also have to realise that our stories and experiences are not solely ours, but rather that they also represent the group we are autoethnographically representing. Sparkes (2013) proposed and

argued that in the process of writing about our own story, we are also writing about the others around us. There are also tensions existing between autoethnography and literary traditions, with stories being put together using complex characters and sources (Clough, 1999).

As an ethnographic and autoethnographic researcher, I can use many devices such as fictionalizing (Clough, 2002) and the use of symbolic equivalents (Yalom, 1991) to protect the participants' identities in autoethnographic accounts. Protective writing styles like *nom de plume* (Morse, 2000), composite characterization (Ellis, 2007) and pseudonyms (Chang, 2008) can be used to protect the privacy of the chosen subjects. Now this may not be possible while doing an autoethnography, as my reader knows that I am discussing about myself and my experiences in an autoethnography. I have to try to present an authentic write-up of myself and my experiences but I also realise that if I am too honest about my feelings, my readers may think badly about me because of my real thoughts. This thought is reinforced by Clough (1998) when he expressed that no subject can be a fully self-identified, fully-aware, or fully-intentional author because unconscious desire makes fully intentional subjectivity impossible. Ellis (1999) understood the helplessness experienced by the autoethnographer in revealing his true feelings and identity and how he would be seen by his peers and readers. The fear of not knowing others' interpretations and having your own life laid out bare in front of others is a scary thought. All these feelings make me think whether I would be able to put down my thoughts on paper; and if yes, would my words accurately describe how I actually feel? Echoing the words of Kraus (2003), "reducing a person's story to words on a page robs it of complexity".

Clough (1998) stated that the realist ideology in ethnography makes us expect that the ethnographic copy will stay true to the original studied life. But this is challenged as it is impossible for anyone to ever finalize a perfectly accurate story (Wall, 2006). As I strive to write my thoughts and experiences in this autoethnographic essay, I will try my level best to express all my thoughts and emotions into words.

In my earlier research efforts to avoid emotion and to achieve objectivity in my analyses, I used to shun personal emotions and resisted autoethnographical writing. My tendency towards a distanced observer role continues to exist within my ethnographic writings, presumably because we ethnographers have a need to reassure ourselves that we are behaving like "real" researchers (Wolcott, 1999). In the world of traditional science objectivity, distance seems to protect researchers and readers from the emotional and intimate details of human lives (Muncey, 2005). The assumption of objectivity being totally possible has been challenged in the last two decades and the classical standards of objectivity in social science research has been weakened (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). It is now believed by postmodernists that the methods and procedures that are employed in research are eventually and continually tied to

the values and presumptions of the researcher (Bochner, 2000). Ellis (1999) made it clear that in autoethnography, the writer tells a story that allows readers to enter and feel part of a story which includes emotions and intimate details that examine the meaning of the human experience. Any efforts to attain objectivity are cut off from the beginning because ethnographers already have an idea of what they want to do and how to go about doing it (Wolcott, 1999). These ideas are set in a “set of intellectual assumptions and constitutive interests” (Stivers, 1993, p. 410).

Autoethnography should therefore be written in the first-person perspective (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). There is also the problem of the self that may appear to others as a performing character, a public self, attending standardized social obligations while concealing its true desires (Goffman, as cited in Hastrup, 1995). I see my vegetarian experience as my way of seeing things, which includes my fears, emotions and paradigms. This has caused me problems in the past as I was not seen as a real researcher by traditional researchers who come from a different paradigm of thought.

My data collection methods included diary writing (mostly on my phone), taking photos of foods, face-to-face and online discussions with fellow vegetarians and family and my own headnotes and memory. My reason for using my memory and headnotes is justified because many ethnographies (Marshall, as cited in Sanjek, 1990) and autoethnographies (Yang, 1945) have been produced from memories and headnotes, at least in the last half a century. Duncan (2004) used an extensive reflective journal as well as e-mails, memos, and sketches to support an evaluation of her professional work. I mostly rely on my memory more than my fieldnotes as I feel that the fieldnotes sometimes confuse and contradict our memory and may contradict the recollected voices of people from the field (Lederman, 1990). Reviewing the fieldnotes and diaries may also make us doubt and can sometimes distort the memory of the actual event (Sanjek, 1990). Even Margaret Mead used headnotes to perceive and record her life experiences while doing her anthropological research as she believed that her long familiarity and her consciousness of her field of research made her perceive and record aspects of lived experience that nobody else could (Mead as cited in Sanjek, 1990).

## **Findings**

### **My Culture**

I am a Hindu by birth, born in a middle class North Indian family. I had the privilege of growing up all over India because my father was in the Indian armed forces and his work required him to move around the country every couple of years. These postings were sometimes in the “field area” and sometimes in the “peace area”. Now these field areas were stations which were sometimes near sensitive border zones of the country. India is a big country which borders Bangladesh and Myanmar in the east,



China, Nepal, Bhutan at the northern front and Pakistan and Afghanistan towards the western side. I have had the privilege of staying in many areas in the north-eastern states like Arunachal Pradesh and northern areas like Jammu and Kashmir. The peace area postings are usually in the heartland of the vast country with a relatively peaceful and mundane lifestyle. I grew up in places like Calcutta (Kolkata) in the east of Bangalore in the south; the metropolitan capital of India, Delhi and Amritsar in the north, the Jaisalmer city in the western desert state of Rajasthan and Jabalpur in the heartland of India in the state of Madhya Pradesh. All these states have their own culture and a myriad mix of religions in every state from largely Hinduism to Sikhism, Islam and Christianity along with smaller but very significant religious beliefs of Jainism and Buddhism. My father was quite open towards trying out new food and assimilating them into our daily food consumption patterns. I could see a lot of my Hindu Punjabi foods like Indian flatbreads (Roti), various curried lentils and beans (dals) and various curried vegetables (*subji*) infused with lots of influences from every part of India. I saw occasional *thukpas* (Nepal/Tibetan meat and vegetable stew), western variations like homemade pizzas, *daal baati* (atta flour balls cooked on fire and served with lentil curry) along with a myriad mix of noodles, meats and vegetables cooked together in a mix of various cooking styles. In addition, hunted meats like wild boar, venison, pigeon and partridge were also on the menu occasionally as my father used to go on hunting expeditions, sometimes with me and my younger brother in tow to the jungles wherever possible. Many years of my life were also spent in a hostel environment in the southern part of India where I experienced southern Indian cooking styles and ingredients very similar to Malaysian Indian food cuisine. Meat consumption, therefore, was an integral part of our family life. I would also like to point out the fact that many of my family members, especially my grandmother and paternal aunts were all vegetarian by birth and I had also been eating Indian vegetarian food for extended periods of time. During those times with my extended family, I do not remember myself missing any meats as it would be readily provided by my father as and when it was possible outside the home. The reason for me staying with the extended family was due to the fact that I lost my mother as a child and was brought up along with my brother solely by my father; who had to sometimes leave us to go for various field area postings where family was not allowed. It is really important to understand my background so that the reader can understand where I came from and how my choices were made based on my cultural background.

### **Why I Tried Vegetarianism**

Vegetarian food is a part of the North Indian, Punjabi culture in which I was born into. I have travelled with my family members from both sides of the family (many of whom are vegetarians) and have seen first-hand how they struggle with their food

choice behaviours when they are on vacation in a predominant meat-consuming country. The reasons for them being vegetarian are quite different from the reasons given by westerners which revolve around ethics, animal welfare or environmental issues. The depth of reasons in the various sects of the Hindu culture for choosing a vegetarian lifestyle also differs.

My understanding of vegetarian food includes milk and milk products because of my religious and cultural background in Hinduism. Most of the time, it was easy when I was home and when I was with my family as I had access to a large variety of Indian vegetarian products. I faced a tough time when I was at work as I had to make food choices which were otherwise, just a question of me deciding where to eat and how much time I had for lunch. Now a recurring question that I ponder over is whether I missed meat and also whether I like a vegetarian lifestyle? The answer is in the affirmative for both choices. I did miss meat because of various reasons. The primary one being that there are not enough options for a full vegetarian meal at my workplace as well as in other restaurants on the way home. I also missed the “chew/bite” feeling which I get when I eat chicken. I agree I did get almost similar feelings when I had mock meat curries at restaurants but it is somehow not the same. Vegetarian meat alternatives are supposed to be unhealthy and fattening according to various researchers (Daniel, 2005). Furthermore, the higher cost of these mock meats puts me off them for regular consumption.

### **My Experience**

My first couple of days started off easy. I have been vegetarian for a few days every now and then for all my life. I find it easy to be vegetarian at home as I can cook what I want and my family is also not fussy about meat products. I planned in advance for my week ahead and cooked food for my work lunch too. Going out for family meals was easy in the first few days. We generally preferred north Indian restaurants as it gave us a higher variety of vegetarian dishes for me and meats for my wife and child. The lack of proper vegetarian restaurants was a big hindrance for me while at work. There were very sporadic vegetarian food choices in most of the restaurants and even those that had variety felt not being enough for me. I could see frustration building as I progressed towards the end of my first week. On one occasion when I accidentally ate a supposedly vegetarian fried snack which later turned out to contain a quarter of a boiled egg, I stopped myself. While sitting there looking at the half eaten curry-puff, I asked myself whether to leave the food or continue consuming it. I have been brought up in a military household where my father reinforced the practice of finishing the food on your plate. This was, in my opinion, because food items were much more costly 25 to 30 years ago (Drewowski & Specter, 2004), and the fact that my father was brought up in a middle-income group family which consisted of six siblings. Reminding myself, that the purpose of this small personal experiment

was to record my experiences of meat avoidance, I ate the remainder of the curry-puff without any feelings of guilt or shame for not following my plan.

I also realised over the next couple of days that I was leaving office more often whenever I did not bring food from home. This was a frustrating as well as a rewarding experience for me. It was sometimes infuriating to me even a simple thing like mushroom soup contains meat stock in many of the restaurants. This dish could be made entirely without the use of meat-based food additives, without sacrificing the taste or consistency of the soup. I also noticed that I had to let go my medical issues (diabetes) and was ordering more high carbohydrate food like vegetarian pizzas, fried vegetable fritters and cookies. I did not do this in the past and was trying to avoid the same for this period. I attribute this action of mine to the scarcity of vegetarian foods and also to my lack of willpower. There were other times when I slipped from my task and ate an occasional piece of French toast which was left over by my daughter. On one occasion, I also had some frozen fish fingers at home with a salad and only halfway through the meal did it occur to me what I had done.

On the other hand, as the weeks progressed, I threw away some frozen meats from my freezer and chiller. My justification was that the meat was going stale. It was a frozen chorizo sausage, my favourite variety.

Having a Chinese New Year break in the middle of the month was a real relief as I had taken leave and stayed home for most of the days. I made whatever vegetarian meal I liked and did not have to go out searching for a vegetarian meal. However, the search did go on for appropriate vegetarian ingredients for me to make my meal. Being home in my comfortable environment, without anyone judging me, I made some wild combination dishes. Leftover black chickpea curry with pasta was one such dish which came out really good.

### **My Loneliness**

Undertaking a specific lifestyle seems lonely and unpredictable. This is because there is no one around you who is going through the same feelings as you. I felt left out while I was under this self-imposed vegetarian lifestyle as I felt that I could not burden my colleagues or family members with my food choices. I felt it was not fair for me to impose my food choice beliefs on others. This seemed to take place as I caught myself indirectly imposing my food consumption patterns on them. My friends and family had to choose their restaurants taking into account my specific food consumption habits. This led me to eat my lunches alone; most of the time, at my office desk. My breakfasts were usually consumed at my desk too but that was the case even when I was on a meat-eating lifestyle. Sometimes due to time constraints at home, as both my spouse and I are working full-time, my meals at office would be a fruit and a raw carrot. Other times, I ate a cucumber and an apple for my brunch. Alternatively, I also felt great at times when I went to the sole restaurant which served

some vegetarian options of lentil curry (dal) and boiled rice for lunch. I was happy as I was getting an opportunity to meet lots of new people while I was there. This would not have had been possible if I was sitting in office for my meals.

### **My Fears**

My fears stem from the fact that I am a Hindu by birth and that as practicing Hindus, we are prohibited from eating beef. This translates into a fear when I eat out as I have to make sure that I do not accidentally consume beef. It is not that I have not done so in the past, both knowingly and unknowingly. My first recollection of accidentally consuming beef was during my school life in the southern part of India in Bangalore. I felt guilty when I realised that I had consumed it but kept eating it as and when I had the pocket money to do so. I told my father about it but did not get a very stern or bad reaction. His reaction to the whole episode was that we should only kill to eat and not for entertainment and if I had beef, it was also considered a food. He told me to avoid it though, because of our religious beliefs and I adhered to what he said for most of my life.

My vegetarian family also suggested to me to go vegetarian and shun meat products completely. As many of them realised that I still consume meat, I was then suggested to remove meat from my diet on certain days of the week and on certain periods during the year due to our Hindu religious beliefs. I have been doing this for a number of years now and try to ensure I do not accidentally eat meat products on these days. This is for me to satiate my family's cultural and religious beliefs rather than my personal religious beliefs.

I also seem to have a fear that I may actually turn into a full vegetarian as I have a growing interest in the subject. The fear stems from the fact that I may get left out from my social groups as most of my friend circle consume meat and I stay in a predominantly meat-consuming country. My food choices may turn me into an outsider within my group of peers and this may negatively affect my life. I also contemplate what would I do if I don't get my chosen vegetarian diet; would I succumb to a meat-based diet on a particular occasion and then later return to a vegetarian lifestyle. Would I still be justified then to call myself a vegetarian?

Another fear which crops up is the fact that my upbringing, my cultural and religious background and my food habits being quite similar to the ones I am researching. There is a possibility that my food consumption fears may not let me observe the obvious in my research subjects when I undertake further research on vegetarians. This could happen as I may not see myself as an outsider observing a particular group and things which may seem queer to an outsider but normal to Hindu religious people like me. I could face potential problems asking the right questions because I myself may not be ready to hear and assimilate the answers. I call this fear of my fears.

### **Making Sense of It All**

According to Coffey (1999, p. 127), “Ethnography is an act of memory” because fieldwork and the resulting texts cannot be separated from the memories that shaped them. Even when interview transcripts and field notes (or, in the case of autoethnography, diaries and journals) exist, these become combined with headnotes, which are memories and recollections from the field (Coffey, 1999). I wrote a simple blog about my one month experience. I also posted some photos which I shot throughout the month at various times. These were usually of foods that I had during the study month. While writing this autoethnographical article, I did refer to some of my photos and my blog on some occasions but I mostly relied on my memories of the lived experience. I rationalised my memories for this article based on an example by Sparkes (2000) where he told a story about his undergraduate class refusing to accept his autoethnography as research. Conversely, when the same students were asked whether they would accept his autoethnography as research if someone else had interviewed a man named Andrew Sparkes, collected his medical records, diary excerpts, and newspaper stories; analysed the collection, and written it up, the students replied in the affirmative. From this example and various other questions that I had faced from colleagues and friends about my experiences, as a vegetarian, it seems that if someone else had interviewed me and analysed my experiences, it would be deemed valid, even when both the researches come from the memories which I have had and relayed to them.

### **Conclusion**

I spent one month reading intensely about vegetarianism from all around the world. I also tried to follow a vegetarian lifestyle for the whole month. I enjoyed the vegetarian lifestyle and if I have the right support from family and restaurant menus, I don't see why I cannot opt for a much better meat-free lifestyle if need be. I undertook this project because I felt that it was important for me to share my insights and experiences of being a vegetarian. This research was not to indulge myself or do self-introspection about my food choices. Just the fact that I learned something new while I undertook this little project was an added bonus as it is a scholarly contribution. The purpose for this mini autoethnographical study was two-fold. Firstly, it was undertaken to understand the challenges for a Hindu religious lacto-vegetarian in a predominantly meat-consuming country. The second was to understand and experience autoethnography as a research methodology. I do understand that many autoethnographers before me have continued to face significant challenges and issues with regard to the legitimacy granted to autoethnography along with the credibility of this genre as scholarly work (Holt, 2003; Muncey, 2005; Sparkes, 2000). Autoethnography is a very personalised research method which has been

much sidelined and marginalised because it emphasises on the researcher thoughts and feelings since the researcher sees himself as a subject. The established research specialists see these autoethnographies as merely good stories but lacking theoretical construction as well as conceptual explanations. These reservations show that there is a deep fear and suspicion of “personal accounts” (Sparkes, 2000, p. 24). Even well-established qualitative methods face resistance from the older and well-recognised research method practices, “use of narrative as a source of empowerment and a form of resistance to counter the domination and authority of canonical discourses” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 749). These qualitative practices are seen as being inferior than quantitative methods because they do not obey the traditional philosophies of objectivity, reason, and truth (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994).

I hope that over time, conventions may change as the boundaries between literature and science become increasingly blurred (Richardson, 2000). Due to the deep personal nature of my research, I contemplate whether it clouds my judgement when it comes to the ethical considerations of the topic. If I now go out to observe, interview and record a group of religious vegetarians like the Hare Krishna Hindu sect, will I misread and misjudge their food habits and intentions because of my cultural and religious background and values? Will my close affinity towards religious vegetarians cloud my judgement and stop me from observing the obvious? Eventually, similar to Ellis & Bochner’s (2000, p.276) predicament, “does the contribution of the story outweigh conceivable ethical dilemmas and pain for characters and readers?”. I feel uncertain about the answer to this question and maybe I would leave it for my readers to decide and advise me. In the end, I feel that I need to understand the vegetarian lifestyle based on the Hindu vegetarian food preferences before I embark on an ethnographic study about their food habits while on holiday. As stated by Van Maanen (1988), understanding the cultural features of the group in question – their beliefs, their reasoning and communication remains necessary in writing any form of ethnography. Auto-ethnography continues to occupy “an intermediate space we can’t quite define yet, a borderland between passion and intellect, analysis and subjectivity, ethnography and auto-biography, art and life” (Behar, 1996, p.174). Autoethnography “opens us to the possibility of seeing more of what we might ignore in both ourselves and others, asking why it is ignored, and what we might need to do about it” (Dauphinee, 2010, p.818). I hope that my foray into this new research collection and analysis method helps us to understand the world of vegetarians from a very different perspective as well as highlight the risks associated with autoethnography.

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