

The Transformative Role of ‘Voluntary Simplicity’ in Encouraging Meat Reduction in Urban India

By: Dr. Tani Khara¹

¹Research Consultant at the Institute for Sustainable Futures, University of Technology Sydney - Australia

Corresponding author: Dr. Tani Khara, tani.khara@uts.edu.au

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Abstract

In contemporary urban India, consumption has transcended its basic role of fulfilling essential human needs. It has evolved into a marker of status, fuelled by the drive for social stratification and conspicuous consumption. In the context of food, meat is increasingly perceived as a luxury item, symbolizing affluence. This shift in cultural norms has given rise to upscale meat stores in major Indian cities, where the types of meat available signify varying levels of prestige.

The rising trend of meat consumption in India has also made it one of the world's most rapidly expanding markets for meat. Urban consumers are not only eating more meat but also developing a taste for unconventional varieties in a culture that appears insatiable for the novel and diverse. Given the ecological and ethical ramifications of increased levels of meat consumption, the need to encourage more sustainable diets in the world's most populous country is paramount.

In this opinion piece, I explore how ‘Voluntary Simplicity’ (VS) may help encourage sustainable eating in India. VS is a conscious choice made by individuals to scale back their material consumption. Studies, primarily among Western consumers, have indicated that heightened awareness of the social and environmental repercussions of their consumption choices can lead to outcomes like reducing food waste, supporting local producers, and selectively purchasing from preferred brands and companies.

Although the subject is relatively underexplored in the Indian context, it appears there is some encouraging evidence for the potential for VS given long-standing Brahmin practices of simplicity and the concept of ‘ahimsa,’ which continue to make vegetarianism a popular dietary choice. On the other hand, a rising number of young, urban Indians are increasingly distancing themselves from traditional notions of simplicity and frugality as they look for ways to assert their identity and uniqueness. In this evolving landscape, vegetarianism is also deemed to be utilitarian, while meat-based foods represent symbols of modernity and high-class status. In this piece, I delve into the viability and challenges of VS in helping to encourage a reduction in meat consumption in India.

Introduction

While India's annual per capita meat consumption is relatively low at approximately 4 kilograms (OECD 2019), only 30% of Indians identify as vegetarians (Census of India 2014). The country is experiencing rapid growth in poultry consumption (Intel Global 2017). Chicken is relatively popular due to its adaptability in various dishes and that, unlike other meats such as beef and pork, it is less likely to be associated with religious taboos (Devi et al. 2014). India also ranks among the highest in the world for its increasing consumption of meats such as goat and fish (OECD 2018). When it comes to regional differences, urban areas show more elevated meat consumption rates compared to semi-urban and rural areas, with changes in eating habits often originating in urban centers (Gogineni et al. 2018; National Sample Survey Office 2012). Additionally, India is poised to become a significant contributor to global meat production, serving both local and international markets (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations 2018).

Given the environmental, health-related, and ethical consequences of increasing meat consumption, I propose that 'Voluntary Simplicity' (VS) may offer a solution to reduce meat intake and cultivate a tradition of sustainable eating in India. VS is the conscious decision to reduce consumption (McDonald et al. 2006). This practice is rooted in ethical considerations, a recognition of one's ecological footprint, and involves consciously choosing simplicity over consumption and accumulation (Rich, Hanna, and Wright 2017). Embracing this way of life involves more than just consuming less; it requires a purposeful and deliberate commitment to the principles of simplicity (Alexander and Ussher 2012). The practice of VS can be segmented into six core elements - reduced material consumption, enhanced quality of life, ecological responsibility, raising social consciousness, fostering self-sufficiency, and reducing work hours (Rebouças and Soares 2021). Future studies would benefit from exploring the interconnections and mutual influences of these various elements (Rebouças and Soares 2021). In this piece, my focus is on VS within the Indian context, and, as part of this, I explore related topics such as social awareness and environmental stewardship.

When it comes to opportunities to reduce meat consumption in India, the principles of VS seem to align with the country's long-standing philosophies, which eschew excess and prioritize the spiritual over material gain. For instance, Hinduism's role in shaping India's socio-cultural identity is significant, as it extends beyond religious doctrine to a comprehensive way of life that has evolved over numerous centuries (Venkatesh 1994). Historical records suggest that several contemporary ecological practices are rooted in ancient Indian scriptures, which emphasize the importance of harmonious coexistence between humans, animals, and the natural world (Sharma, Aggarwal, and Kumar 2014). This regard for the environment and its diverse life forms also played a role in the predominance of plant-based diets in India (Davidson 2003).

On the other hand, India is experiencing a cultural transformation characterized by a growing penchant for conspicuous consumption (Ghadge 2018; Maddox 2020; Mathur 2014). The economic reforms of the early 1990s marked a transformation in urban India, moving from a culture that valued simplicity and frugality to a society seeking novelty and social standing (Upadhyaya 2009). Sinha (2011, 5–6) further elaborates on this by highlighting that the economic changes have led to a move away from traditional Brahmin values and towards ideals associated with “success, winning, glory, and heroism.” I propose that while VS may

offer significant benefits, its acceptance in contemporary urban India might also be hindered by a societal culture that seeks to shed its frugal past in favor of a more indulgent future.

As consumers, Voluntary Simplifiers are a global segment with a distinct social identity (Elgin and Mitchell 1977). Their ingroup similarities tend to be stronger than cultural differences (Strizhakova and Coulter, 2013). VS studies have mainly focused on Western consumers to date (Rebouças and Soares 2021), and findings indicate that increased awareness of consumption impacts can lead to more sustainable behaviors, such as reducing food waste and selectively supporting products and companies ('buycotting') (Rich, Hanna, and Wright 2017). In comparison, little research has been done to understand the relevance and efficacy of VS within a culturally diverse country like India. I hypothesize that VS could potentially serve as a viable strategy to reduce meat consumption in India, drawing upon synergies and commonalities it shares with the country's ancient philosophical practices. Subsequently, I also discuss potential critiques and constraints associated with implementing VS within India.

Statement 1: Why might Voluntary Simplicity (VS) help with reducing meat consumption and encouraging more sustainable eating practices in India?

Key Insight #1: India draws from its long-standing traditions while it adopts new and emerging consumption trends

The concept of VS is not foreign to India, as it resonates with many of the country's deep-rooted philosophical tenets. 'Ahimsa,' which advocates for the reverence of all life forms and abstinence from violence, reflects some of the social and ecological facets of VS. Additionally, the concept of VS aligns with 'Saatvik' eating, a traditional Brahmin diet comprising minimally processed foods deemed "natural and 'good for the soul' (Dolphijn 2006, 118). Major Indian religions like Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism, and Sikhism also commonly advocate practices ranging from modest living to rigorous self-discipline, which include renouncing non-essential desires to achieve a higher quality of life (Davidson 2003). While urban Indians today may be open to adopting new cultural habits, they also prefer to blend these with long-standing traditional practices (Deb and Sen 2016; Maddox 2020). The contemporary urban Indian is described as seeking a blend of "austerity and extravagance" (Mathur 2010, 225) and wanting "to nourish the practices of yesterday with the resources of today" (Sinha 2011, 173). Thus, while Western minimalism arose as a response to consumerism during the Industrial Revolution (Rebouças and Soares 2021), VS appears to be in harmony with India's historical philosophies and lifestyles. In view of this, I propose that there is potential for VS, particularly if it is adapted to suit the contemporary urban palate.

Key Insight #2: The Gandhian influence of minimalism and the practice of 'Jugaad'

Gandhi's ethos of 'Living simply so that others may simply live' serves as a cornerstone of his worldview (Weber 1999). Post-independence, Indian enterprises adopted a Gandhian concept of trusteeship, viewing themselves as capitalists given the chance to serve as custodians, managing resources for the benefit of society (White 2008). This communitarian dimension remains relevant for several Indian businesses today (Jones and Seth 2019). These foundational principles also find expression in the Indian concept of 'Jugaad,' which champions resourcefulness and ingenuity in the face of scarcity (Radjou, Prabhu, and Ahuja

2012). 'Jugaad' primarily aims to drive innovation when resources are limited and has inspired a global wave of entrepreneurial resourcefulness (Prabhu and Jain 2015). One example is 'Embrace,' a low-cost, portable infant warmer created for premature babies in areas with inconsistent electricity supply (Radjou, Prabhu, and Ahuja 2012). Another is 'MittiCool,' an eco-friendly, electricity-free clay refrigerator that supports both environmental and economic sustainability (Radjou, Prabhu, and Ahuja 2012). This implies that VS might find its relevance in Indian society, contributing to the promotion of a more conscious and minimalist way of living.

Key Insight #3: Changing urban attitudes and green collectivism

Although studies on meat consumption in India are somewhat sparse, prior research on ethical consumption patterns in the country suggests that younger and more educated consumers are more inclined to embrace socially and ecologically responsible behaviors (Jain and Kaur, 2006). There is growing consciousness among India's younger generations about global environmental issues (Goswami 2008), as they demand that companies “must explain not only their own products but also the larger issues of pollution, climate change, overfishing and other environmental problems” (Gill 2012, 9). The role of collectivist values is also important in encouraging sustainable consumption, as the ideals of community well-being and unity are significant predictors of green practices (Kirmani and Khan 2016). India's wealthier citizens, who, despite having the means for lavish spending, are also increasingly choosing to adopt simpler, more intentional lifestyles (Rathour and Mankame 2021). All this collectively appears to support the potential of VS as a mechanism to encourage more sustainable forms of consumption.

Statement 2: Why might Voluntary Simplicity (VS) not help with reducing meat consumption and encouraging more sustainable eating practices in India?

Key Insight #4: The narrow potential for VS is evident, as two-thirds of India's population falls below the 'middle class' category.

According to a 2021 study, slightly over half (52%) of India's households were categorized as “aspirers,” with their yearly income falling between Rs. 12,500 (around AUD \$250) and Rs. 50,000 (approximately AUD \$1,000) (Rathour and Mankame 2021). A further 15% of Indian households were identified as “destitute,” with annual earnings below Rs. 12,500 (Rathour and Mankame 2021). This income distribution, skewed toward the lower end, raises questions about the pertinence of adopting a VS lifestyle in India. The concern arises because a significant proportion of the country's population may be primarily focused on meeting basic daily necessities, i.e., compulsory simplicity. Other work has similarly highlighted that the ‘voluntary’ nature of the adoption of a simple lifestyle may often exclude those who have little to no freedom of choice (Boujbel and D'Astous 2012; Etzioni 1998). It seems then that for this significant segment of Indian society, the principles of VS may not apply as their daily lives are already a pursuit of essential sustenance, rendering the idea of cutting back on consumption as perhaps both impractical and unnecessary.

Key Insight #5: At the higher end of the income scale, individuals who have the means to afford meat also regard it as a symbol of status.

Meat is increasingly viewed as a status symbol in urban India (Goswami 2016). This has led to the emergence of high-end meat shops in major urban centers, where different varieties of meats signify status (Ahmad 2014) and modernity (Staples 2016). In comparison, vegetarian restaurants are considered ‘utilitarian’. Underpinning this is the trend of conspicuous consumption. Conspicuous consumption may be associated with eco-friendly actions, though these behaviors are not always motivated by environmental considerations. Adopting eco-friendly behaviors can be a status symbol (Winge 2008) and may be leveraged as a means to display one's social standing (Beall et al. 2021). Food may similarly serve as a way for various social groups to differentiate themselves (Miele 1999) (Miele, 1999). This was corroborated in our recent study in urban India, where adopting a vegan diet was perceived as a trendy lifestyle choice rather than as an eating practice motivated by social or environmental concerns (Tani Khara and Ruby 2019; Tani Khara, Riedy, and Ruby 2020b).

On a broader scale, the pronounced social stratification in India has fostered a wide range of consumption patterns in the realm of food as well as other categories. This reflects the multifaceted impact of social hierarchy on lifestyle choices in the country (Mathur 2014). An article titled ‘India’s elites have a ferocious sense of entitlement’ goes further to highlight the prevalent negative social attitudes among some of India's affluent classes (Butalia 2013). This piece by Butalia (2013) discusses how consumption often serves as an indicator of social categorization, underlining the role of material possessions in defining status within these groups. Other studies have also emphasised the ostentatious aspect of consumption in India, used as a way for individuals to assert their social standing. I propose that although this trend may not be in line with the socially conscious nature of VS, it may perhaps indicate the potential for reshaping this idea to better suit some of the prevailing attitudes. Perhaps this adaptation could be akin to how eco-friendly actions are employed as indicators of social standing, suggesting a tailored approach to align with local perspectives.

Key Insight #6: Backstage meat-eating and self-presentation in India

While meat consumption is witnessing an upward trend in India, it is important to acknowledge the prevailing social stigmas associated with it in a predominantly Hindu country. Obtaining accurate figures on meat consumption in India is challenging as cultural restrictions and taboos may lead to underreported consumption (Bansal 2016). These taboos also account for differences between public and private behaviors concerning meat consumption among some Indians. Our recent 2020 study delved into cognitive dissonance and behavioral variations concerning meat consumption in India (Tani Khara, Riedy, and Ruby 2020a). It explored diverse instances of backstage meat consumption – or private eating behaviors – among urban consumers. The backstage setting often comprised places outside the home, such as restaurants, and, in some instances, segregated “safe” spaces within the home itself (Khara, Riedy, and Ruby 2020a). Within these spaces, we explored how consumption taboos are broken. This provided insight into various actions taken to cover up backstage meat consumption and present appropriate frontstage appearances – or public behaviors – before a vegetarian audience as meat consumption was kept ‘a secret’. In view of this, I argue that the significance placed on self-presentation and maintaining societal appearances within India's collectivist society (Patel 2018) may not align favorably with the principles of VS. This is because VS entails the intentional choice to lead a simpler life and make mindful, meaningful and sustainable decisions (Rich et al. 2017; Alexander 2012) rather than merely conforming to norms (Newholm and Shaw 2007).

Conclusion

In India, the rising trend in meat consumption is influenced by various elements such as urban growth, greater spending power, and the view of meat as a marker of social standing. Given that the country's age-old traditions inherently embrace VS – a philosophy that values mindful living, intentional choices, minimalism, and ecological sustainability – these established ideas could potentially be leveraged to moderate meat consumption. However, the country's glaring income disparities may mean that many are mainly concerned with fulfilling basic necessities. Although some studies indicate that VS is not exclusive to the affluent and this lifestyle can also be chosen by those whose basic needs are less well satisfied (Huneker 2005; Rebouças and Soares 2021), there are other social complexities to consider. These include meat being perceived as a status symbol, as well as the pressures to conform to prevailing social trends. Given these considerations, there is a need for future research to better understand how VS could influence current consumption patterns within this complex cultural urban landscape, which blends collectivism and individual self-expression.

Some potential exploration areas could include examining how VS is perceived in India, particularly in balancing traditional simplicity practices with modern interpretations of VS. Additionally, we may consider exploring how various demographics view VS. For instance, we could investigate the alignment of VS with eco-friendly behaviors among younger Indian consumers. We may also consider the impact of religious beliefs on VS, given religion frequently shapes consumption patterns in India (Khara, 2023). One or more of these areas of exploration would deepen our comprehension of VS in the context of India's evolving culture while also contributing to promoting more sustainable dietary practices.

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