

## SPECIAL FEATURES

## Vegetarianism and Veganism in Jainism

Ayona Katariya

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At every birthday party, there is always one item that has been the bane of my existence: cake. Especially because it is filled with my four-letter arch-nemesis called “eggs.” If my parents had ever given in to my begging, I would have scarfed the whole thing down, but unfortunately, I could only stare at the white delight from a distance as the other kids enjoyed their plates. “The world is unfair,” I thought to myself. Knowing something had to change, this moment sparked my passion for cooking and all things food. My love for food stems from Jainism.

Growing up Jain, I quickly learned that food is more than just fuel; it is a way to live in harmony with the world. Vegetarianism is a fundamental principle of Jainism, rooted in the practice of ahimsa, or non-violence. We believe that all living beings, from the mighty elephant to the feeble ant, have souls deserving of respect and protection. Meat, fish, and eggs all involve consuming a life, therefore going against this philosophy. Even root vegetables like onions and garlic are often avoided because extracting the root kills the plant. These practices instilled in me a deep respect for life and influenced my approach to finding proper substitutes for recipes.

As I grew older and learned about food production, I began to question the role of dairy in traditional Jain diets. While milk and ghee have long been staples, modern dairy farming practices often conflict with Jain principles of non-violence and compassion. Veganism has emerged as a logical extension of ahimsā, eliminating the exploitation of animals for food. Although still uncommon among Jains, this new tradition is gaining traction among those who want to adhere to stricter values and address environmental concerns. This, in turn, inspired me to embrace plant-based alternatives like almond milk and aquafaba.

Food is sacred, and its preparation is an act of mindfulness and gratitude. Take Paryushan, for example, the annual eight-day festival of self-discipline, reflection, and forgiveness. We practice fasting or adopt stricter dietary rules, such as only eating before the sun sets, known as Chovihar. We avoid overindulging in food by refraining from eating greens, salt, root vegetables, and oil. These traditions taught me to approach cooking with intention and respect, seeing it as a way to nourish the soul, mind, and body.

Jainism has deeply shaped my relationship with food, enhancing my appreciation not only for what I eat but also for what I choose not to eat. This “restriction” we call vegetarianism and veganism is hardly that,

as it reflects a commitment to compassion, sustainability, and respect for all life forms. By embracing these principles, I discovered how food can honor tradition while fostering creativity. Creating ethical and delicious meals is a meaningful way to honor my heritage while embracing innovation—especially if I still want to enjoy birthday cakes.

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