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IN MY OPINION

Nepal's Meateaters

How I discovered a nonvegetarian Hinduism

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Last summer for two-and-a-half months I had an eye-opening experience in Nepal, the birthplace of Lord Buddha, the embodiment of peace and nonviolence. I interned in a nutrition program with the international nongovernmental organization, Save the Children, in the Siraha District, which is in the southern part of Nepal, bordering the Indian state of Bihar.

During my visit to Nepal, I was fortunate enough to see quite a few places, including the capital city Kathmandu and the famous tourist stops, Pokhara and Gorkha. What I encountered during my stay led me to reflect, "What are the boundaries of the Santana Dharma?"

I knew that Nepal was declared a Hindu state. But what I was raised to think was Hindu and Non-Hindu was now

being challenged. I have been a vegetarian all my life, so I was shocked upon seeing the amount of meat being consumed in the country.

Before, whenever people asked me why I was a vegetarian, I always replied, "It's my religion. I am a Hindu." However, as I grew up, I met and noticed other Indian Hindu people who were not vegetarians. Now I reply, "I was raised as a vegetarian." People then go on to ask if my whole family is vegetarian. "Yes, they are," I reply.

In Nepal, it was hard for me to even find a vegetarian restaurant. This is very different from my hometown of southern Karnataka, in southern India. I noticed this because when my grandmother came to visit me in Nepal, she would refuse to eat out.

So I started to question the relationship between vegetarianism and Hinduism. In Nepal, it seemed that vegetarianism was related to caste. The higher the caste, the more vegetarian a person was. In Nepal, all meat is consumed, except for beef. The lower castes eat pigs, pigeons and snails. Among the group I was with, I was the only vegetarian. At times, vegetarian food was ordered only for me.

Eating meat also seemed to be a sign of status. Whenever I visited people in their homes, they first asked me if I ate meat, or they would offer me eggs. I would tell them that I was vegetarian. They would ask me if I was brahmin, and I would say yes.

I asked my dad if vegetarianism is part of Hinduism. He explained to me that ahimsa (non-violence) is part of Hinduism. I remember a Nepali friend of mine saying that people in Nepal are eating more meat, while people in the West who are not even Hindus are starting to decrease their meat intake. It seems that more and more people are realizing the benefits of vegetarianism in the West.

Many Hindu temples in Nepal post a sign, "Entrance for Hindus Only," while none of the Buddhist temples I went to in the same country have any such restrictions. I questioned some interns of these temples how they knew if a person was Hindu. I thought that they were judging by skin color, but I was told they see if men are wearing the sacred thread.

Another difference I noticed in Nepal was the amount of animal sacrifices that occur at temples. When I was in Gorkha, and visiting a temple, I observed all the chickens and goats people were bringing into the

temple. I felt awkward taking the prasad that looked like it had touched animals' blood.

I also felt in Nepal that they were just as conscious about caste as in India, but not about ethnicity. For example, whenever I am in India, my aunt makes sure I wear a bindi on my forehead. In Nepal, I did not feel that people cared whether I wore a bindi or not. So after visiting Nepal, I realized that the boundaries that define Hinduism have new meaning. Animal sacrifice, meat consumption, not wearing bindi, restricting temple entrance to Hindus only, casteism! Where do all these things fit in? The questions: "What is a Hindu?" and "What makes a Hindu?" have longer answers than I once thought.

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