

India's changing appetite throws up meaty issues

February 4 2013, by Rachel O'brien

With German sausages, French duck breasts and homegrown chicken, Francis Menezes is cashing in on the growing appetite for meat among Indians—even in one of Mumbai's most strictly vegetarian areas.

In the upmarket neighbourhood of Malabar Hill, numerous shops, restaurants and even some apartment blocks remain meat-free.

But Menezes, co-manager of the Cafe Ridge food store, says he does a brisk trade in "non-veg", especially with those who have studied abroad.

"Things like Thanksgiving, which was never celebrated over here in Mumbai, is now being celebrated every year. The new generation are cool with eating anything," he said.

India's booming middle-class is driving the demand for meat in a country with a traditionally low intake—a survey in 2006 showed that 40 percent of the population were vegetarian.

Fish and meat have long been part of other Indians' diets but for many they used to be a rarity, said Arvind Singhal, chairman of the consumer consultancy group Technopak Advisors.

"With rising disposable incomes, [meat consumption](#) is increasing," he told AFP. "Before meat would have been seen as for a special occasion."

Members of the Jain faith and some groups within India's majority

Hindu religion hold vegetarianism as an ideal. Father of the nation Mahatma Gandhi espoused a meat-free diet as part of his non-violent philosophy.

But fewer of the younger generation appear to feel the same.

Despite coming from a "hardcore veg" Hindu community, bartender Ishita Manek is an enthusiastic member of the Mumbai Meat Marathon, a group that gets together every weekend to try out protein-heavy dishes.

"It's just to do with the country progressing. The mindset is changing and no one really sticks to traditional values anymore," she said, although she admitted her mother dislikes her love of beef, a taboo under Hinduism.

— A "chicken revolution" —

There are no recent figures on overall meat consumption, but the UN Food and Agriculture Organization in 2007 put India's per capita intake at 5.0 to 5.5kg—the country's highest since records began, with further increases expected.

With chicken a favourite meat, the rapid rise of the domestic poultry market is a good indication of changing diets.

Currently worth an estimated \$9.0 billion, it is growing at an annual rate of 20 percent, driven by broiler meat, according to Technopak.

Farm manager Vijay Sakhrani turned to the broiler business back in 1982 with 2,000 chickens. He now rears more than 800,000 a year as a contract farmer for Indian poultry giant Venky's.

"You have self-employment, you require a small space. In a small space you can do a lot of business," he told AFP in Koregaon Mul village, 30

kilometres (18 miles) from western Pune city, where he said numerous other farmers had followed his foray into poultry.

Venky's general manager Vijay Tijare described a "chicken revolution" going on in India and one, he believes, that can supply the need for economical protein among the nation's 1.2 billion people.

The company's thriving fortunes enabled it fund the takeover of the leading English football club Blackburn Rovers three years ago.

With a median age of 26.5, India's calorie needs are set to grow faster than the population, but the domestic supply of vegetable proteins has not kept up with demand and India is now the biggest importer of pulses.

Others see mass-produced meat as only doing damage to middle-class diets, especially when cooked at the growing number of fast-food joints. While malnutrition is wide-scale among India's poor, an estimated 63 million in the country had diabetes in 2012.

"Industrial meat is adding to the crisis in health," said food security analyst Sangita Sharma.

"Consumers are oblivious as to what is going on their plates."

— Competition for resources —

Changing consumption patterns also threaten to exacerbate the country's environmental pressures.

India is the world's top buffalo meat exporter, despite the beef taboo, and the leading emitter of greenhouse gas methane from livestock, according to a report from the New York-based think tank Brighter Green last year.

Citing water scarcity and intense strains on land, the group said it was crucial for India to promote plant-based diets and prioritise less resource-intensive industries than livestock.

"With 500 million cows, buffalo, goats, sheep, camels, pigs, and billions of chickens, 600 million farmers and 1.2 billion people, the competition is on in India for natural resources," said its report.

Singhal too expressed concerns, especially the challenge thrown up in diverting grains to animal feed, which critics say takes food away from the poorest members of society.

He said one way to ease the pressures was to think beyond India's traditional desire for self-sufficiency.

He criticised a ban on poultry imports from the United States, despite the fact that chicken legs are popular in India but often go to waste in America. The ban is purportedly to prevent bird flu but has been challenged by Washington as disguised trade restrictions.

India's per capita [meat](#) consumption for now remains well below the Asian average, but with its population due to become the world's largest in coming years, analysts are calling for greater attention to how its food is produced.

"[India](#) needs to realise it is not a vegetarian country," Singhal said.

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