“You don’t know what you are missing” my friend informed me, as soon as he learnt that I was a vegetarian. Well, I did know what I was missing since I was myself non-vegetarian for several years, before switching sides.

Our eating habits are a matter of personal choice, usually influenced heavily by our immediate family, and by the company we keep. Other strong influences are circumstances, religious reasons, and health reasons. There also convictions we may pick up along the way that may dictate our idea of an acceptable menu. The topic of vegetarianism Vs non-vegetarianism, is quite old perhaps. However it is worth revisiting from time to time, since what we eat is such a fundamental part of our existence. What I present here are largely my personal views and what I have garnered from the views of friends over the years. I believe that we often do things in a certain way simply because that is how we have always done it in the past. The more mundane the activity, the lesser the time we spend in analyzing what we do. We do not afford ourselves the opportunity to re-examine our behavior and the choices that we have knowingly or unknowingly exercised. In fact we are often not even aware of the choices at our disposal. In this article I merely hope to rekindle the thought processes associated with a very fundamental aspect of our existence, our food.

I am of the opinion that many of us are comfortable with the idea of non-vegetarian food simply because all of the associated emotionally difficult ‘processing’ is done by someone else. Once an animal is chopped up, cleaned, cooked and finally served on our plate, it appears, in principle, no different from a potato. However, many of us will not be able to bring ourselves to catch a live animal, and despite its pleas, cut it up and proceed to eat it. How can we afford leave from our conscience simply because someone else did what we seem to consider ‘indefensible’ on our behalf? I have heard friends say ‘It was already killed anyway’. Make no mistake, it was killed in anticipation of your demand.

My views on this topic are based on a few simple observations. Just look at animals around you or see their behavior documented in so many wildlife television shows. It is easy to observe that animals have a strong sense of family. Goats, cows, and chicken do take care of their little ones. Animals have a sense of happiness, a sense of distress, of pain, and of fear. How then can we brush aside all of these and treat a chicken leg no different than a potato?

I have met people who are quite comfortable with hunting and eating the meat they catch. The arguments I present mostly address the rest of us who may enjoy eating meat but wish to ignore what it represents. As beings that are ‘more aware’ of their actions and their consequences, we cannot hide behind the comfort of time and distance between the food we eat and the actions leading to its origin. If the bill we pay after a meal can trace
itself directly back to an action we are quite uncomfortable with, we have to exercise our choices more appropriately.

Some will argue that such a large fraction of the world's population depends on meat for food, that if we were all to become vegetarians, there will not be enough food for all of us. To the best of my knowledge this argument does not hold merit. To generate one kilogram of meat you have to serve the animal several kilograms of grain. So, by not having a meat based diet, people will potentially have access to several times as much grain as the meat that they have abandoned. We will have a food surplus rather than a food shortage, in relative terms.

There is of course a health angle to all of this. Animal protein is apparently better assimilated by the human body, when compared to vegetable protein. In fact, I remember reading an article a long time ago, which stated that a budding fast bowler for the Indian cricket team was advised to switch to non-vegetarian food so that he could put on some more muscle. By the same token, vegetarian food also has several health benefits, one of which is that it is typically lower in 'bad' cholesterol. So taken purely from a health benefit perspective, a mix of vegetables and meat can do you a lot of good.

In our campus, with the extent of close proximity that we have with wildlife, there is a constant tussle on who owns what. Recently, once again, monkeys became the topic of discussion with several people complaining of the menace from the monkeys, in particular how they ‘steal’ milk in the morning from the packets outside homes. It is natural for anyone who has had an adverse experience with campus monkeys to be unfavorably disposed towards them. However, as one faculty member put it, ‘How can we complain about the monkeys, when we have ourselves stolen the milk from the cows!’ Of course, that sort of an argument may be considered extreme by some, but I think it is revealing in the types of views we may not be considering, but which are valid in their own sort of way.

Is it wrong to eat or use all products traceable to animal sources? While any views on vegetarianism are bound to be subjective, significantly greater subjectivity seems to exist on the acceptability of various products traceable to animal sources. My own personal view is that using ‘passive animal products’ such as milk is fine – it is no different than benefiting from the hard work of a farmer whose crop we buy, and is therefore acceptable. I consider milk to be a ‘passive animal product’ merely because the animal is not killed for this product. It is still not kind to the animal, but this is where I am exercising my subjectivity and accepting a product of animal origin.

There is a practical angle to all this. I remember going to a restaurant in the early days of my graduate studies in the US, and asking the waitress if there was anything vegetarian in the menu. The look on her face made it clear to me that she thought I was joking. She did not respond for a few moments, perhaps under the impression that I would declare that I was indeed joking and just pick something from the menu card she had given me. After a few awkward moments of silence, it became clear to her that I was not joking. At this point she was quite embarrassed since she did not seem to have encountered this question
before. She called another waiter over and repeated my question. This did not improve the situation. Finally, after much discussion, she offered me salad.

Salad is fine. But it is hardly my idea of a meal. In India this is not an issue. There is an almost unlimited variety of delicious vegetarian food available here. As one of my friends put it, we have over two thousand years of culinary evolution to show in our country – and boy is that tasty! Add to this the recent trend to substitute soy based products for meat, and one can enjoy the ‘taste’ of meat without having to also digest troubling thoughts.

So how far should we take the idea of vegetarianism? I feel we should take it a little further than we traditionally tend to. For example, some have strong views against eating meat and yet do not realize or recognize that leather goods are also from the same source that they find unacceptable for eating. Silk production too is said to hurt/kill the inhabitants of the cocoons. In both cases we have alternatives. There are synthetic alternatives to leather, and there is ‘Ahimsa leather’ as well as ‘Ahimsa silk’, both traceable to the Gandhian principles of non-violence. Synthetic alternatives are cheaper (and you can’t get cheated when all you are asking for is the fake stuff!). Ahimsa leather as well as Ahimsa silk are harder to come by and more expensive. I am told that Ahimsa leather is from the skin of animals that died of natural causes, while Ahimsa silk is obtained after the caterpillars have left the cocoons. Usually Kadhi stores are likely to stock these but when I enquired at one such store I was told that ‘only some of their shoes were made of Ahimsa leather, but they do not know which ones’! There are various sources for Ahimsa silk and I have managed to buy some from private stores that even claim patents on their non-violent processes. These are expensive relatively speaking, but my view is if you are buying clothes for an auspicious occasion in your family, why should you knowingly spend money on clothes that are tainted by the suffering of creatures in nature?

Finally, there are those that argue that vegetarianism goes against the idea of natural selection and survival of the fittest. But that is exactly what being human is all about. We often focus on the grand capabilities of human beings. However, I think sometimes what makes us truly grand is our ability to restrain ourselves from doing several of the things that we are perfectly capable of doing. So yes, vegetarians may ‘miss something’, but vegetarians enjoy the fiber of life!