

The Asian Religions - Their Dietary Restrictions

The three major religions found among Asian immigrants are Islam, Hinduism and Sikhism; each profoundly affects the diet and customs of its followers.

Islam

Islam, the religion of the Muslims encompasses a multitude of different sects which exhibit varying degrees of orthodoxy, ranging from the strict Sunnis of Pakistan, to the westernised Ismailis of East Africa. For a muslim, religion, law and social organisation form an inseparable whole governing not only religious practice and morality but social relationship, diet and hygiene. The Koran (Muslim Bible) decrees that "the flesh of those animals that are cloven footed and those that chew the cud, is lawful food, but that which dieth of itself, the blood and swine's flesh and that over which any other name than that of God hath been invoked is forbidden to you." Because of this injunction, a Muslim will eat no Pork or pig products. Great care is taken not to break the edict, frequently ice cream, pastries and jellies are refrained from in the belief that they contain pig products; fish and chips are not bought in case the oil they are fried in has also been used to fry pork sausages.

A Muslim should, if he is not sure, ascertain the ingredients of a dish before partaking of it. Schools and canteens have to take care not to use the same utensils for pork and other dishes for Muslims will not eat the food once it has been touched by pork. This concept also prevents them from shopping at English butchers where one knife is used to cut all the meat including pork.

Some Muslims will only eat Halal meat, others are prepared to eat animals slaughtered by Christians or Jews. The term Halal is applied to an animal which is bled to death and dedicated to God by a Muslim. Many Halal butchers now exist in this country, they visit the slaughterhouses to supervise the killing of their meat which is specially stamped with a Halal symbol. Frequently they keep live chickens in the rear of their shops and slaughter these in Halal fashion on demand. In Bradford and Nelson special canning factories have been set up by Asians to provide canned food which is acceptable to the Muslim community. Many Muslim children will not take meat for school lunch if they believe it is not Halal.

Fish must be alive when caught, but does not have to be killed in any particular fashion. However, Muslims may only eat fish that have fins and scales, therefore, shellfish and eels are effectively forbidden. Tinned and fresh filleted fish sold in British shops may not be purchased by Muslims for they cannot be sure if it had fins and scales before preparation.

Muslims are forbidden to take alcohol, they should take care to avoid food containing it, and to keep away from places selling it. Traditionally in a Muslim home the men eat first and the wife and children eat later unseen by the man. Food is considered to be a gift from God and Muslims are not expected to waste it, neither are they encouraged to over-eat they are instructed to eat only until their stomachs are two-thirds full.

On reaching 'the age of responsibility' all Muslims are expected to fast for the ninth month of the lunar year known as Ramadhan. The age of responsibility is taken as 15 years for boys and 12 years for girls. A few people, such as pregnant and lactating women, the incurably sick and the elderly are exempted from the fast, instead they must provide food for a poor person for the month. The fast demands that no food or drink should be taken between dawn and sunset. It is not, therefore, surprising to find that during this month at School Muslim children faint and find it difficult to concentrate.

Orthodox Muslim sects believe that a woman should not expose her face or body to any men other than close relatives. If she leaves the house she has to observe purdah which prevents any of her skin being exposed to sunlight, Muslim men rarely take their wives out and may even do the shopping themselves. In most sects the women do not go to worship in the mosque with the men. Every evening from 5.00 p.m. to 8.00 p.m. many Muslim children attend Mosque School. For these reasons Muslim women and children are unable to spend enough time in the sunlight to prevent their developing osteomalacia and rickets.

Hinduism

Hinduism is a religion which is largely practiced in the home, it has strong caste affiliation and a joint family system which together act to impose social sanctions on the family controlling everything from eating habits to marriage.

Hindus believe that if they behave incorrectly in this life, they might be reincarnated as an animal; hence they regard all life as being related to them. Most Hindus refuse either to kill or eat any animal; the JAINS an extreme sect even sweep the ground before them to avoid stepping on an insect. Mice run freely in the kitchens of some JAINS in this country because they cannot bring themselves to kill them.

The cow is a particularly sacred animal to the Hindu and since the 7th Century it's slaughter in India has been restricted. Gandhi explained that the cow is the supreme symbol of the animal world and that by saving it from death a Hindu is able to achieve penance and self purification. Milk and its products may be eaten, because they do not involve taking the animal's life, indeed they are highly prized, particularly ghee.

Fish is not eaten by most Hindus, both because they believe they should not kill it and because they consider it dirty. If they do eat fish, they prefer to select varieties with white flesh which bear least resemblance to meat; this means that if a Hindu in this country of eating fish, it is unlikely to be any of the vitamin d rich oily fish. Eggs may be taken by less orthodox Hindus and are frequently enjoyed by men; women often know eggs are good for them, but cannot overcome their revulsion at eating them. Men wanting to eat eggs may have to cook them as their wives refuse to touch them.

Hindu children staying for lunch at school usually take only vegetable; as they are used to home-made mild cream cheese they find unpalatable the English cheese offered as an alternative to meat. Puddings and custard seem to be enjoyed by most children, but some may not even take these in case the pudding contains eggs. Working Hindus dislike the canteen food provided in factories and often refuse it for religious reasons. As a result many bring Asian snack food as well as crisps and biscuits for lunch. Hindus in general, and particularly children, most readily adopt those parts of the English diet supplying so-called 'empty' calories, sugar, sweets and soft drinks being very popular. These are deleterious to them because a vegetarian diet can only supply enough protein if most of the foods eaten contain at least some proteins.

The more rigidly Hindus adhere to a vegetarian diet, the more they feel they are likely to better themselves. The high castes like the priests may exist only on the 'purest' of foods, for example, one priest maintained he had eaten nothing but peanuts and milk for the last eleven years. Abstention from eating food is a much praised virtue among Hindus; most Hindus spend two or three days a week 'fasting'. This 'fast' entails taking only 'pure' foods such as milk, fruit, nuts and starchy root vegetables like carrows and potatoes, of which they may take as much as they wish. One fasting family had for their evening meal potato crisps with peanuts, chips, potato curry and a pudding made from milk and sweet potato.

Vows of abstention from certain foods are believed to influence events. For example, for two years a Hindu lady has abstained from rice while awaiting permission for her son to come from India.

For the Hindu food is closely connected with religious ceremonies, fruit is often offered to the Gods before being eaten and during the wedding ceremony the bride and groom feed each other with sweet meats.

Hinduism does not require its women to remain in seclusion, but few go out to work because employers do not allow them to wear saris. The women go out shopping but usually frequent Indian grocers where they do not have to cope with the language problem. Hindu girls are not expected to start wearing saris until late in their teens or in some cases only after they marry. Consequently, the girls freely partake in games at school, although once they reach puberty they may prefer to wear trousers to school rather than short skirts. Hindu girls are, therefore, less restricted than the Muslim girls and are more likely to get out into the sunshine.

Sikhism

Sikhism, which combines concepts from Hinduism and Islam was founded only 600 years ago by GURU NANAK. Sikhs believe there is only one God. All men are believed to be equal and all Sikhs are given the surname 'SINGH' in order to prevent identification of their caste which is normally indicated in a Hindu's surname. Sikhs like Hindus believe in the concept of reincarnation as animals.

It is forbidden for Sikhs to eat beef; they may eat pork, but very rarely do so. Their meat should be killed with one blow on the head and unlike the Muslims, should not be bled to death. Some Sikh children may not eat meat at school if they believe it is beef, but they are rarely particular about the method of slaughter. Sikh women sometimes abstain from meat, but most take eggs. Orthodox Sikhs are expected not to drink alcohol, but many Sikh men ignore this.

Women in Sikh homes have considerable freedom. They are able to worship with men and are given the same education. Many Sikh women go out to work once they have overcome their initial difficulties of life in a new society. Sikh women dress in trousers and tunic; they are not expected to wear this traditional dress to school, but are expected to return straight from school and put it on in the evenings. They usually spend their evenings helping with housework and cooking. Even with the freedom to go out, Sikh women and girls expose little of their skin to sunlight because of the nature of their clothing.

Sikh boys, who wear turbans once they reach their teens, are traditionally good at sport, many play in school teams in the evenings and at weekends, thereby acquiring plenty of exposure to sunshine.

