



# WORLD VEG CONGRESS IN GOA, INDIA 10-16 SEPTEMBER 2006

Vanessa Clarke, Vegan Society International Contact

*With the International Vegetarian Union's World Congress being held this year in Goa, India, Vanessa Clarke looks at the historic and continuing links between the vegetarian movements in India, the UK and the rest of the world.*

**Just as the Danish vegan festival is being held where two seas meet, so the entirely vegan World Congress in Goa represents a coming together of widely differing cultures, as India invites us to bring back and reinforce the message of compassion for all beings that earlier generations brought to the West from India.**

Nearly 30 years ago, in an article entitled 'To India for the Congress', the late Serena Coles described how much she and other Vegan Society members had learned from their counterparts in India and her delight at meeting and talking to so many young people in schools and colleges and on the radio. She was also proud to deliver the Vegan Society paper 'Food for a Future' at the main congress in Delhi, but concluded – as so many of us have concluded since then – that 'the greatest results may well come from the seeds sown by the many personal contacts, by the sharing of ideas and insights, by the three weeks of freely giving and receiving between so many different countries and cultures. May they grow strong and quickly and help to create the more humane world we all long to see.'

Now, once again, our colleagues in India invite us to return to redress the balance and stem the tide of pro-meat propaganda reaching India from the West. In the words of organiser Jashu Shah, 'Non-vegetarianism is travelling at a fast pace from West to East. The younger generation is sitting on the fence, not knowing where to jump.'

Meanwhile, the great spiritual leaders who have always been at the heart of Indian life and culture are making it very clear which way they believe humankind as a whole should jump – and it is the Vegan Way!

The revered Hindu Swami Chidatmananda is committed to a vegan diet, as are other members of the worldwide Chinmaya Mission which does so much to alleviate suffering and injustice as well as promoting spiritual values.

Gurudev Chitrabhanu, respected by Jains world wide, recently invited Stephen Walsh and myself to join him on the platform at the inauguration of a new temple and assist him in exhorting an audience of 7,000 British Jains to come to the congress in Goa, support The Vegan Society and, above all, Go Vegan!

## Indians in Britain – Gandhi and beyond

The temple visit was an awesome experience and a reminder that up to half a million Britons - Jains, Hindus, Sikhs and others – have links with the strongly vegetarian culture of India. The enthusiasm of Nitin Mehta and the highly inclusive Young Indian Vegetarians has been well known for a quarter of a century and Nitin has been promoting veganism for at least a decade now. The staff and Council of The Vegan Society also include members who have family ties with India. All these people, whether their families came direct from India or via East Africa, Malaysia or elsewhere, bring with them a special relationship with the veggie cause dating back many generations and their input is helping to make veganism and the Society relevant to an ever wider cross-section of the population both at home and abroad.

Meanwhile, the same progression from traditional vegetarian values to the vegan path can be seen in the Hare Krishna movement, much of whose food aid is now vegan, and even in the Tibetan VegSoc, whose leader was funded by the Dalai Lama (sadly not yet vegan, but strongly supportive of the society's aims) to join us at the recent European congress in Italy and hopes very much to attend the Goa congress.



photo courtesy of Joan Court

Gandhi was an active member of the London Vegetarian Society

Even before the founding of the International Vegetarian Union – the umbrella organisation for vegetarian and vegan societies throughout the world – there had been a Vegetarian Federal Union, for which one of Britain's most famous Indian visitors had high hopes. When Mohandas K. Gandhi first came to London as an 18-year-old law student he discovered the work of Henry Salt and became an active member of the London Vegetarian Society. At his farewell dinner before sailing home to Bombay in 1891 he expressed the hope that an international congress would be held in India.

## The IVU and the international movement

It was not until 1957 that IVU finally fulfilled Gandhi's dream. For many years a strong European bias remained, an offer from San Francisco to organise a congress in 1915 being turned down as too far away. Meanwhile, Gandhi devoted himself to working for Indian independence, though on a visit for talks with government officials in 1931 he found time to attend and speak at a London Vegetarian Society meeting with his old friend and mentor Henry Salt at his side. After independence, however, the Indian vegetarians began to take a more active role in IVU and when the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary congress in Dresden had to be cancelled they seized the chance to show what they could do.

The World Congress in India in 1957 was unlike anything anyone had seen before. Instead of one week in one place with a couple of hundred delegates, it was spread over a whole month with venues many hundreds of miles apart, audiences of thousands and an opening address by the President of India.

The next three Congresses were back in Europe as usual, but the Indians had shown what they could do and in 1967 they did it again – this time with the Dalai Lama as well.

One of the delegates in 1967 – the late Jay Dinshah, an American of Indian origin and founder of the American Vegan Society – was inspired by all this to organise the first World Congress in North America, in 1975, attracting 1,500 delegates and providing a launching pad for the movement there. The next congress was the one in India that Serena Coles described so enthusiastically in *The Vegan*. IVU had finally become a genuinely global union. In recent years, World Congresses in Thailand, Canada, Scotland and Brazil have built on that legacy, attracting ever more young people and moving with the times by stipulating in the IVU bylaws that all events must be entirely vegan – including, of course, the forthcoming congress in Goa and the centenary congress in Dresden in 2008.

### About Goa

About 250 miles south of Bombay, on the palm-fringed shores of the Arabian Sea and with a recorded history dating back more than 2,000 years, Goa is India's richest state and also one of its smallest. After an extended period of Portuguese rule, Goa finally became India's 25<sup>th</sup> state a generation after the rest of India became independent.

The climate is tropical, with the highest temperatures in May followed by monsoon rains from June to August. The most popular season for tourism is thus from autumn to spring. The main religions are Hinduism (65 per cent) and Roman Catholicism (30 per cent) and the main languages are Konkanim, English and Marathi, plus some Portuguese and Hindi. All these and several other Indian languages are in the new expanded *Vegan Passport*, so don't leave home without it!

A unique blend of East and West, Goa is an exotic mixture of temples and churches, fine beaches, amazing natural scenery and a rich diversity of wildlife. The most popular sport is football, which is played on any open space not currently under cultivation or

under water, while despite lack of contact with British rule cricket is overtaking hockey in popularity due to massive coverage on Indian national television. Western songs in English are at least as popular as traditional Konkanim folk songs, with 19<sup>th</sup> century Manddo music and dance for special occasions - and then there is the famous Goan trance music.

Rice is the main agricultural crop, followed by areca, cashew and coconut. Coconut and coconut oil is widely used in Goan cooking along with chilli, spice and vinegar, giving the food a unique flavour. The most popular alcoholic beverage is Fenny, made by fermentation of the fruit of the cashew tree or the sap of the toddy palm.



Goa is renowned for its exquisite temples

More than half the region is covered by forest, with a huge variety of flora and fauna, much of which enjoys protected status. The Salim Ali bird sanctuary is one of the best known in India and national park land and wildlife sanctuaries abound, while the Western Ghats mountain range is comparable with the Amazon and Congo basins in terms of biodiversity. There are several large rivers with countless small islands and over a hundred medicinal springs.

### About the congress

The congress will be a mixture of formal talks, workshops, entertainments, excursions and, above all, delicious vegan food shared with likeminded people from all over the world.



The Radisson White Sands, venue for the Congress

The venue is the Radisson White Sands hotel, on the finest beach in Goa. Registration charges are US \$120 single, \$225 double, children under 12 free, with charges rising after 31<sup>st</sup> May. Pre- and post-congress tours are also available. Total accommodation costs for the whole period (including meals at the congress) range from about \$200 per person in cheaper hotels to \$350 in a two-person standard room at the Radisson or \$700 for a single with sea view.

### Getting there

Flying time is about 11 hours from the UK by scheduled flight via Mumbai (Bombay) or charter direct to Goa's Dabolim airport. Prices vary from £300 return to more than twice that figure, so it's worth shopping around. (Remember that the code is GOI and not GOA or you'll find yourself being directed to Genoa, Italy!) For information about visas (compulsory), medical precautions (optional), and about India generally and Goa in particular, contact the India Tourist Office, 7 Cork Street, London W1X 1PB, tel. 020 7437 3677

*I am indebted to IVU Webmaster John Davis for much of the material used in this article. For further information, see [www.ivu.org/congress/2006](http://www.ivu.org/congress/2006), subscribe to [ivu-india@yahoogroups.com](mailto:ivu-india@yahoogroups.com) or call 020 7928 7459.*

*Vanessa Clarke is on the Council of the Vegan Society and also of the European Vegetarian Union.*