

GANDHIAN APPROACH TO HEALTH- CELEBRATING 150 YEARS OF GANDHI**Dr. Prakhar Srivastava***

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ABSTRACT

Mahatma Gandhi is an international symbol of peace. What remains lesser known are his teachings on health. The year 2018-19 marks 150 years of Gandhi. On this occasion we look back into the life and teachings of Gandhi and their impact on health. Today India, like many other developing nations, is facing double burden of diseases in the form of communicable and non communicable diseases. Majority of our health problems can be solved by following simple Gandhian methods. They are applicable to all aspects of health, namely, physical, mental and social health. His methods have survived the tide of time and are relevant even in the era of modern medicine. We take a dive into the history and search for health solutions which are simple, inexpensive, efficacious and above all, 'swadeshi'.

KEYWORDS

1. Gandhi
2. Natural healing
3. Preventive medicine
4. Nature cure

Gandhian Approach to Health- Celebrating 150 years of Gandhi

"In health, means body ease. He is a healthy man whose body is free from all disease; he carries on his normal activities without fatigue... His mind and his senses are in a state of harmony and poise." -Gandhi, Key to Health^[1]

As we celebrate 150th birth anniversary of Gandhi, we find his views on health as relevant today as they were in the past. Gandhi was a learned man with a scientific approach, who was intensely drawn towards health and hygiene. As early as in 1906, while in South Africa, he wrote articles on health which were published in the Indian Opinion and later as book, Guide to Health.

Health has physical, mental and social dimensions; Gandhi not just preached but practiced a holistically healthy Indian lifestyle. He was opposed to western lifestyle which increased bodily comforts, encouraged intoxication and decreased physical strength. He wanted to be a doctor when he was young but was against vivisection and the use of animal fat and alcohol in medical preparations. He believed modern hospitals to be necessary evils. "The doctors induce us to indulge, and the result is that we have become deprived of self-control and have become effeminate", he writes in Hind Swaraj.^[2]

India in Gandhi's era faced many health issues, some of which it faces even today. Owing to growth and development, a new variety of non communicable diseases (NCDs) have come up. India is experiencing double burden of diseases; NCDs form 55% while communicable, maternal, neonatal, and nutritional diseases form 33% of total disease burden in India.^[3]

Primordial as well as primary prevention of NCDs can be very effectively done by Gandhian methods. The major risk factors for NCDs are tobacco, insufficient physical exercise, alcohol, unhealthy diet, raised blood pressure, raised blood glucose, obesity and raised cholesterol.^[4] Gandhi preached regular exercises, fasts, healthy diet and was against the growing culture of consumerism in the west that made man lazy and dependant. He urged people to walk on foot, spin charkha and abhor machines. Even in jails Gandhi walked in the allotted space every morning and evening.

He laid immense stress on the importance of healthy eating. "My experiences in dietetics are dear to me as a part of my researches in Ahimsa."^[5] He was a strict vegetarian, inspired from Salt's Plea for Vegetarianism. He started the Vegetarian Society in Bayswater, England. His diet was limited, simple, spiceless and if possible, uncooked. He mostly ate fresh fruits and nuts. At one point, he gave up salt altogether for a period of ten years. A recent study reported significant reduced levels of

BMI, total cholesterol, LDL-cholesterol and glucose as well as reduced risk of ischemic heart disease and cancers in vegetarians.^[6] The DASH diet (Dietary Approaches to Stop Hypertension)^[7] can also be traced back to Gandhian ideas.

Gandhi fasted on a regular basis. He pledged himself never to take more than five articles in a day and never to eat after dark. A 2017 study showed that fasting protects from obesity, cardiovascular diseases and metabolic diseases through activation of cellular stress response elements, improved autophagy and altered hormones.^[8] The 2016 Nobel Prize in Medicine was awarded to Yoshinori Ohsumi for his discoveries on autophagy and that fasting can prevent diseases like cancers by inducing autophagy.^[9]

Tobacco is the single biggest avoidable cause of cancer in the world today.^[10] Gandhi smoked briefly when he was young. He later gave it up as it was "barbarous, dirty and harmful".^[5] He believed in Tolstoy who said that tobacco was the worst of all intoxicants.

While all the above mentioned are aspects of individual health, Gandhi also foregrounded the importance of community health. Many deaths are still occurring in India from infectious, parasitic and vector borne diseases, abetted by malnutrition. There has been an appreciable change in the prevalence of tuberculosis and filariasis, but little change in the prevalence of viral hepatitis, diarrhoea and dysentery.^[11]

Communicable diseases can be effectively prevented by Gandhian methods. He said, "Sanitation is more important than independence". He urged people to dispose off their excreta themselves and that there was no shame in cleaning and scouring. He stated that no one should spit or clean their nose on streets to prevent germs from infecting others and spittle, mucus from the nose, etc, should be covered with earth.

He himself cleaned the dirty latrine at INC meeting in Calcutta. He was critical of the insanitation in Indian trains and Hindu temples. In his speeches, articles and campaigns, he would often educate the people about hygiene. His ashrams were known for their cleanliness. All rubbish was buried in pits. Vegetable peelings and left-over food were dumped in a separate manure pit. The night soil was buried and later used as manure. Waste water was used for gardening.^[12]

The disease burden due to unsafe water and sanitation in India is still 40 times higher per person than in countries like China.^[3] We have started the work with Swachh Bharat Mission but are yet a long way from Gandhian ideals.

Gandhi did considerable work in the field of Public Health. He was appointed as a member of the sanitation committee of Rajkot when plague broke out in 1896. He

went home to home inspecting latrines. When plague was imminent in Durban in 1899, he taught people the importance of keeping environment clean. When there was outbreak of black plague in Johannesburg in 1904, he along with Dr William Godfrey and Sjt Madanjit nursed the patients in an improvised hospital. He also nursed wounded soldiers during the Boer War (1899), the Zulu Rebellion (1906) and the World War 1.

Gandhi believed that man had little need of drugs. He did not consider nature-cure merely a course of treatment; it was a way of life. "999 cases out of a thousand can be brought round by means of a well-regulated diet, water and earth treatment and similar household remedies", he argued.^[5] Gandhi had immense faith in naturopathy and proposed treatment based on the right use of the 5 elements or 'panchmahabhuta': bhumi (earth), jala (water), tejas or agni (fire), vayu (air), vyom or shunya (space or zero) or akash (ether or void).^[1] In his ashram the common joke was: "If you want Bapu near you, fall ill."^[12]

Gandhi was inspired by German Naturopath, Adolf Just's book, Return to Nature: Paradise Regained, in which he talks about consuming all-natural food and clean water, breathing in fresh air, spending solitary hours in nature and earth therapy. When Gandhi was assaulted by the Pathans in South Africa, he applied earth poultice on his bruised mouth, forehead and ribs. He used cold mud poultice for constipation, headaches, snake bites, boils and abscesses. Mud can cause infections but Gandhi preheated the mud and used proper disinfection measures.^[1] Gandhi successfully treated Ramdas' fracture with earth therapy. The use of mud therapy in modern medicine is cited for knee osteoarthritis^[13], chronic rheumatic diseases^[14] and psoriasis.^[15]

Gandhi also experimented with hydrotherapy, suggested by Louise Kuhne's New Science of Healing, consisting of hip bath and sitz bath. He used them for treating fever and constipation. When Manilal had pneumonia and delirium, he treated him with hip baths and wet sheet packs. When he himself had dysentery, fever and delirium, he performed hydrotherapy. Modern medicine shows efficacy of hydrotherapy in rheumatoid arthritis^[16], fibromyalgia syndrome^[17], migraine^[18], obstetrical^[19] and other disorders. Sitz bath is routinely prescribed for various anorectal diseases.^[20]

Gandhi knew the limitations of naturopathy and still he patronised it since it was within the reach of the poor and was cent percent swadeshi. At the age of 77, he established a nature cure centre in a village called Uruli Kanchan.

The mental health aspects of Gandhi's teachings are profound. 4.5% of Indian population suffers from depression while 36% are likely to suffer from major

depression at some point of their lives (WHO, 2015). An average 371 suicides occur daily in India.^[21]

Gandhi taught us self-restraint, self-control and most importantly how to cultivate peace of mind. He was a brahmachari, one having restraint over all his senses. Brahmacharya which he had been observing willingly since 1900 was sealed with a vow in 1906. He believed that mind cannot attain requisite firmness without chastity and a man who is unchaste loses stamina, becomes emasculated and cowardly. Many other great men like Swami Vivekananda held congruent beliefs and motivated us to channelise the vigour and zeal of youth into purposeful deeds rather than sensual indulgences.

He taught us ahimsa (non-violence), satyagraha, aparigraha (non-possession) and happiness in solitude. He told us to not become enslaved by money and luxuries. He was against substance abuse which gives rise to various mental disorders. Gandhi was very religious and chanted Ramanama since his childhood.

Gandhi's work on improving the social health is immense. He was instrumental in India's independence. He taught us swaraj (self-rule), Indian-nationalism, women empowerment and how to get above all forms of discrimination, be it caste, colour or creed and happily cohabit as a society.

Allopathic drugs were not a taboo for him. During cholera epidemic in Sevagram he allowed for vaccination. He was operated for appendicitis and anal fissures. When he inaugurated a Medical College in Delhi in 1921, he said, "I would like to pay my humble tribute to the spirit of research that fires the modern scientists... Let our Kavirajs, Vaidyas and Hakims apply to their calling a scientific spirit that Western physicians show..."

He wrote to his friend Thomas Titus in 1933, "...Allopathy, although it has great limitations and much superstition about it, is still the most universal and justifiably, the most popular system... Allopathy is an all-inclusive system. It can well include homeopathy, biochemistry and the latest nature-cures."

He was "profoundly skeptical of traditional Ayurveda", encouraging it to adopt a progressive scientific approach. He never favoured any one system of medicine but thought that an appropriate amalgamation of different systems should be formed which would result "in a harmonious blending, and in purging each of its special defects". The AYUSH Department started by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare in November 2003 is perfect example of timeless efficacy of Gandhian beliefs.

While there are admirers of Gandhi's discourse on health, there are also many critics. Researchers like Sandhya Shetty consider Gandhi's experiments a reckless

disregard of the imperative to preserve life.^[22] Gandhi was labelled as anti-science by Nehru, Bose, Saha and Tagore. Many authors criticised him of being a quack; retrograde, irrational and questionable. Gandhi's views may appear idealistic and irrational but are actually developed using scientific tools of experimentation, reasoning, cause-effect analysis and allow for changes wherever necessary. Science has been defined as search for truth and when one examines him in depth, we find that he was a true scientist.

According to Gandhi, a true physician must probe into the cause of the disease and rather than mending bodies, he should mend souls. He should not needlessly pamper patients with drugs.

The system of health which Gandhi promoted was a blend of the positive elements of all the systems of Medicine. It is a true celebration for us that his teachings and his experiments on health continue to guide us today and his writings are a refreshing source of knowledge and inspiration for us.

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