

GANDHIAN VEGETARIAN DIET - SECRET BEHIND HEALTH

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Abstract: Mahatma Gandhi, fondly addressed as the Father of the Nation, and born as Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, was a revolutionary personality in ways more than one. Not only was he an indispensable part of the Indian freedom struggle, but he also taught the people of India and abroad certain principles of life that have stuck with us, decades after decades. He led a simple lifestyle that comprised simple habits like khadi clothing, walking long distances, believing in the power of non-violence, and a vegetarian diet. The vegetarian diet that Gandhi followed and encouraged was always regarded as being healthy by most people. However, with time, as research on the topic has developed, scientific backing to the claim has been found. The diet that Gandhi followed was essentially vegetarian. He was always a supporter of animal rights and strictly opposed the ill-treatment of animals and reportedly shifted to the consumption of goat milk instead of the cow or buffalo milk, to oppose the ill-treatment meted out to them.

Keywords: Vegetarian Diet, Fasting, Fruits, Milk.

Introduction: M.K. Gandhi, a man of action, who won the world by his message of ahimsa (non-violence), felt it within his body and spirit. He believed in being the change he wished to see in the world, and one such benevolent change was his vow to never consume meat, milk or milk products. His story and experiments are great inspiration for anyone in favour of living a cruelty-free life. The Gandhi family members were Vaishnavas, and hence staunch followers of vegetarianism. Being born and bred in such tradition, M.K. Gandhi was opposed to meat-eating from the start, but it was Gandhi's vow to give up milk and milk products that made him close to being a vegan. He stood by his vows as much as his mortal being allowed and spread the message of vegetarianism by inspiring others through his actions and words.

When he was leaving for England at the age of 18, in 1888, he vowed to not touch wine, women and meat, after which his mother gave him the permission to go. He abstained from meat during his voyage to England, and even upon reaching there. This caused him a lot of inconveniences. A lot of people laughed at him, and some well-wishers reasoned with him to eat meat, but he survived on bread until he found a good vegetarian restaurant. He was introduced to various definitions of vegetarianism in England, where he read several books on it. All the writers that he read about had ethically arrived at the conclusion that 'man's supremacy over the lower animals meant not that the former should prey upon the latter, but that the higher should protect the lower, and that there should be mutual aid between the two as between man and man.'

After reading one such book called, Salt's Plea for Vegetarianism, Gandhi made an intellectual choice, not because of his parents but because he wanted to, in favour of vegetarianism, the spread of which then became his mission. This was his first step that brought him close to being vegan. An added advantage for Gandhi, living alone in England on limited means, was that a vegetarian diet was hygienic and the least expensive. Another lifestyle choice that brought him close to veganism was, in South Africa, when upon being intellectually prodded by a friend and poet Raychandbhai, he started contemplating to take the vow of brahmacharya, the perfect observance of which means the realization of Brahman or universe. He learnt that milk stimulates animal passion, and so the thought of giving up

milk in the interest of self-restraint grew upon him. During this time, he came across some literature from Calcutta, 'describing the tortures to which cows and buffaloes were subjected by their keepers.' This had a profound effect on him.

Gandhi's vow was put to test when he was on a campaign in Kheda to recruit young Indian men to fight for the British Army. During long and tiring marches, an error in diet caused an attack of dysentery that led him near death's door. This illness protracted and made him test his principles. Therefore, even though Gandhi physically went a step back on his vows, he was conscious of the setback, and in spirit, he maintained his purity, which reflected in his motto of non-violence. That motto inspired millions of people around the world at a time of great violence, and it still shapes the reasons of many. It also happens to be the heart of the concept of veganism.

Gandhi was skeptical of salt, then drastically changed his views. While Gandhi knew his favorite fruits and vegetables naturally contain salt, he steadfastly avoided adding any additional salt to his meals. According to Slate, Gandhi embarked on a salt-free diet in 1911, but he eased up over time after listening to his doctors. By the late 1920s, Gandhi welcomed a little salt — no more than 30 grains per day — into his diet. After understanding the importance of salt — particularly for those working in the fields — Gandhi went on to protest Britain's hefty tax that made salt virtually unattainable for poor people in India. His 60,000-protester-strong Salt March in 1930 was integral to India gaining independence in 1947.

Fasts were key to Gandhi's political and nutritional diet. While Gandhi's fasts altered the course of history including his famous 1948 "fast unto death" for peace in Delhi, he also fasted for religious and nutritional reasons. Gandhi fasted dozens and dozens of times, including his longest stretch of 21 days. Gandhi avoided sugar but couldn't give up this one "sweet". For the most part, Gandhi kept sugar out of his diet, but he had one major exception: fruit. He loved fruit. In fact, while he was successfully restrictive when it came to processed or refined sugars, the strong-willed Gandhi had trouble curbing cravings when it came to "sweets" like mango.

Gandhiji was known for his "healing touch", but few are aware of how Mahatma Gandhi himself struggled with ill-health. Gandhiji was hypertensive, fell prey to a plethora of diseases such as pleurisy (inflammation of the lung lining), gastric flu and malaria, and had to be operated twice in his life. These, and many such intriguing details about the Mahatma's experiments with diet and naturopathy to cure himself, have been revealed in the latest issue of the Indian Journal of Medical Research. The special issue, titled 'Gandhi and health @150: Footprints of Indian Council of Medical Research's century long journey' discusses Gandhiji's medical reports, health files, dietary regimes and nutritional dilemma from the year 1924 to 1948.

He would experiment with natural remedies and different schools of thought. Sometimes, though, the treatment protocols would be rather unconventional. For instance, during his stint in South Africa, Gandhiji suffered headaches and constipation. When diet and laxatives didn't work, he adopted a method that most nutritionists and practitioners of modern medicine would scoff at – he started skipping breakfast. He had heard of the 'No Breakfast Association' in Manchester that worked towards improving the health of those who ate too much...For the first few days, he found this new regimen tough, but gradually, the headaches disappeared completely...it made him realise he was perhaps eating more than what was needed."

At other times, however, his methods were rather extreme, at one point in his life, Gandhiji gave up food and milk and was convinced he could survive on a dozen or two oranges. He only gave this idea up after his doctors convinced him that he would need at least 50-75 oranges daily to survive! What is interesting is how, in his bid to cure himself, the Mahatma always focused on altering his diet – natural diet of fresh fruits and nuts, giving up milk, making his own unleavened wholemeal bread with hand-ground flour, and frequent fasting. He also started eating garlic daily to treat his high blood pressure, and much to his doctors' surprise, managed it for years after the initial frightening diagnosis of hypertension.

According to Slate, Gandhi didn't push his strict diet and nutritional beliefs on peers. He wrote about his food experiments in letters and books, but humbly acknowledged that he didn't know everything and openly listened to others' findings. It wouldn't be wrong to say that the vegetarian diet may, in fact, be more relevant in today's time, given the scale at which health issues are prevalent today, which is way more than what it was in Mahatma Gandhi's age and time. The vegan and vegetarian diets, however, do come with their own set of restrictions. A recent study has shown that a vegan diet is associated with a deficiency of a brain nutrient. A balanced diet, in that case, maybe the way to go.

As Gandhi's philosophy of *swaraj*, or self-rule, began to gain an ever more sophisticated definition, he became increasingly disinterested in the question of physical strength. In his scheme of things, mental fortitude—harnessed by discipline, prayer and compassion—was of paramount importance. Food was one vehicle to achieve such a condition—it was a supplier of nutrients, rather than being a purveyor of flavour, taste and pleasure. Perhaps the most severe expression of Gandhi's instrumental relationship with food was in his entire rejection of it for sustained periods of time.

Conclusion: Structured around the pillars of his diet “vegetarianism, limiting salt and sweets, rejecting processed food, eating raw food, (and) fasting” Gandhi anticipated contemporary movements for the ethical production, consumption and dissemination of food. Long before zero-waste lifestyles and vegan diets gained social currency, he was experimenting with these modes of living. Like most early adopters, he was led to modify his search by the exigencies of his time and the demands of his health. At Tolstoy Farm in South Africa, for instance, Gandhi urged the residents to grow the food on their plate. He encouraged the consumption of raw vegetables and fruits, partly to enable women to get a reprieve from the kitchen. A committed vegetarian for most of his life, Gandhi remained a lapsed vegan, even though, as early as the 1930s, he had already tried out substitutes like almond jelly, peanut milk and soybean, with varying degrees of success.

**Gandhi might not have been vegan by the letter, but he was every bit of it at heart.
May we complete what Gandhi started in spirit!**

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