

ISSN: 3048-5940 (Online)

Name of the Publication: Global Gandhi

Half-yearly e-journal published by Shanti Sahyog Centre for Nonviolence, New Delhi, India (CFN) in collaboration with the Gandhi Research Foundation (GRF), Jalgaon, Maharashtra.

Volume No: VOL II ISSUE 2

Year of publication: Jan- June 2025

Nature Cure: Gandhi's Futuristic Health Swaraj

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Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi has left an indelible mark on India, not only as a leader in the freedom struggle but as a thinker who introduced entirely novel ideas in content and approach. His philosophy and practice of using Truth and Nonviolence as weapons against the mighty British Empire made him renowned worldwide. However, an equally intriguing aspect of Gandhi's life was his commitment to Nature Cure. Gandhi adopted this practice to maintain his own health and treated his close associates with it. This choice is both surprising and inspiring. Surprising because Nature Cure was a little-known system during his time, and inspiring because it is rooted in a rational and scientific understanding of human life and health. Gandhi's embrace of this approach provided a fresh perspective on the meaning of health and the role of health services, emphasizing the individual's responsibility for his/her own well-being.

Self-discipline and control over one's senses were central to Gandhi's philosophy of health. He believed these qualities were the foundation of physical fitness and mental strength. For Gandhi, reliance on external health systems, particularly those imported from the West, was both ethically problematic and practically unsustainable. He warned that dependence on external systems could lead to a form of slavery, leaving individuals vulnerable to exploitation. In contrast, Nature Cure, with its emphasis on living in harmony with natural principles, offered an empowering alternative. It taught individuals to lead healthy lives with minimal expense, eliminating the need for dependence on drugs, doctors, and hospitals.

Brief Overview of the 'State of the Art' in Critical Medical Research

In today's world, where pharmaceutical companies wield immense power, Gandhi's insights remain profoundly relevant. The high-tech medical industry often fosters dependence on a system driven by profit rather than patient well-being. Ivan Illich, in his seminal work *Medical Nemesis: The Expropriation of Health* (1974), analysed the medicalization of society and the unintended harms caused by healthcare interventions, a phenomenon he termed "iatrogenesis." The Greek word "iatrogenesis" refers to harm caused by a healer or unintended adverse outcomes from medical treatment that are not part of the natural course of illness or injury.

Illich himself observed that increasing healthcare expenditure did not necessarily translate into improved health outcomes, a conclusion supported by various studies. For instance, when *Medical Nemesis* was published in 1974, the United States spent 8% of its GDP on healthcare. Today, that figure has ballooned to 18%, with little evidence of proportional health benefits. As Atul Gawande noted in *Complications* (2002), a study in the *New England Journal of Medicine* revealed that nearly 4% of patients in New York State experienced complications from treatment that extended their hospital stays. Alarming, one

in four of these cases involved negligence. Currently, it is estimated that over 44,000 patients in the U.S. die annually due to medical errors (O'Mahoney 2020).

In addition, Illich highlighted a troubling pattern: more drugs and hospital stays often result in increased suffering. He described the "medicalization of life" as producing a "morbid society". Yet, Gandhi had foreseen this trend in his work *Hind Swaraj* (1909), where he critiqued the medical profession, stating:

"Doctors have almost unhinged us [...] I have indulged in vice, I contract a disease, a doctor cures me, the odds are that I shall repeat the vice. Had the doctor not intervened, nature would have done its work, and I would have acquired mastery over myself, would have been freed from vice and would have become happy. It is worth considering why we take up the profession of medicine. It is certainly not taken up for the purpose of serving humanity. We become doctors so that we may obtain honours and riches. I have endeavored to show that there is no real service of humanity in the profession, and that it is injurious to mankind. Doctors make a show of their knowledge and charge exorbitant fees. Their preparations, which are intrinsically worth a few pence, cost shillings. The populace, in its credulity and in the hope of ridding itself of some disease, allows itself to be cheated. [...]"

This critique aligns with Illich's argument that painkillers and excessive medical intervention erode cultural and social coping mechanisms. The term "social iatrogenesis" describes how medicalization creates dependence on healthcare and generates anxiety over minor deviations from perceived norms. Similarly, "cultural iatrogenesis" refers to the erosion of traditional practices for dealing with pain, suffering, and death, such as prayers, rituals, and community gatherings. These practices fostered empathy and understanding of human

vulnerability, but are now overshadowed by sterile medical interventions that prioritize survival at any cost.

In *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End* (2014), the author, Atul Gawande, echoes this sentiment, reminding us that death is a natural, inevitable part of life. Modern medicine's focus on prolonging life often overlooks the human experience and the need for social intimacy, leading to individuals spending their final moments in isolated, impersonal settings, disconnected from loved ones.

While pharmaceuticals have undoubtedly contributed to treating illnesses, their overuse and misuse create significant challenges. For example, the rise of multidrug-resistant tuberculosis (MDR-TB) exemplifies how improper use of antibiotics can exacerbate health crises. The phenomenon of anti-microbial resistance (AMR), where bacteria and other micro-organisms become impervious to treatment, poses a global threat. According to the World Health Organization's 2012 report, *The Evolving Threat of Antimicrobial Resistance*, addressing this issue requires a multifaceted approach, including strengthening health systems, improving anti-microbial stewardship, and encouraging innovation in drug development.

Many drugs, once widely prescribed, were later withdrawn due to adverse effects, which had caused irreversible harm to individuals and families while enriching pharmaceutical companies. Such practices erode trust in modern medicine, revealing a system influenced more by market forces than genuine scientific concerns. Aggressive marketing strategies create artificial demand by constantly redefining what is considered 'normal', thereby making nearly everyone a candidate for treatment.

The growing awareness of patient rights and media scrutiny has widened the gap between patients and healthcare providers. Violence against healthcare

professionals has emerged as a troubling consequence of this mistrust, with surveys indicating that over 75% of doctors face some form of workplace violence, often instigated by patients' relatives. While negligence by healthcare providers is unacceptable, so is violence against them. Laws like the Maharashtra Medicare Service Persons and Medicare Service Institutions (Prevention of Violence and Damage or Loss to Property) Act, 2010, aim to protect medical professionals, but, first and foremost, fostering mutual understanding is crucial.

In view of the crucial need to curtail our contemporary irrational drug usage, it should be emphasised that the USA dominates the pharmaceutical industry (due to their high level of research and so-called development), accounting for 42.6% of the global market as of 2022, and its influence continues to grow. The sector's valuation of \$222.4 billion in 2023 (according to a Global Survey) is projected to reach \$373.81 billion by 2032, with oncology drugs leading the market in 2024, with a projected market volume of \$194.10 billion. Given this escalating scenario, Gandhi's vision, advocating self-reliance and natural living, stands as a timeless counterpoint to this pharmaceutical juggernaut.

Reviving Gandhi's Vision: Nature Cure as a Remedy for Modern Health Challenges

Mahatma Gandhi's profound advocacy for Nature Cure remains a beacon of wisdom, especially in the face of the growing challenges posed by today's profit-driven healthcare systems. His unwavering belief in the efficacy, affordability, and universal accessibility of Nature Cure therapy—free from commercial influences—underscores the relevance of his vision in addressing modern health crises.

This perspective was poignantly articulated in a letter Gandhi wrote to Pyarelal Nayyar, his personal secretary, when the latter was bedridden with malaria.

Pyarelal sought permission for Dr. Sushila Nayyar (his sister) to nurse him. Gandhi's reply was stark and uncompromising:

“Those who go to villages have to go there with a determination to live or die there. If they must fall ill, they have to get well there or die there. Then alone could the going have any meaning.”

Gandhi's insistence on self-reliance extended to healthcare. He envisioned every village being self-sufficient not just economically, but also in terms of health and well-being. To this end, he established the Nature Cure Ashram at Urulikanchan near Pune, Maharashtra, aiming to empower rural populations with the tools and knowledge of natural healing.

India, even today, grapples with the dual burden of malnutrition and communicable diseases, compounded by a rising tide of non-communicable diseases (NCDs). These lifestyle and environment-driven ailments now constitute over 50% of the disease burden in the country. Above all, we should remember that most of the NCDs are caused by preventable risk factors like tobacco use, physical activity and nutrition.

Now let us take a look at the World Health Organization's list of the top 10 global causes of disability-adjusted life years (DALYs) in 2021, namely, 1) Ischemic Heart Disease, 2) COVID-19, 3) Stroke, 4) Chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, 5) Lower respiratory infections, 6) Trachea, bronchus, lung cancers, 7) Alzheimer disease and other dementias, 8) Diabetes mellitus, 9) Kidney diseases, 10) Tuberculosis. They are all preventable and can be managed with very meagre expenditures and resources. Yet, unfortunately, prevention is completely ignored, and morbidity is increasing. People are living only to go to labs and hospitals!

Almost all NCDs are preventable by adapting to healthy lifestyles. People should be encouraged and constantly persuaded to start taking responsibility for

their health. Governments should focus only on providing emergency medical services to all the deserving people irrespective of their financial status. Market-driven medical industry in active collusion with pharma industry cannot gain public trust as it is inherently profit-oriented; and public health is the first casualty. This has been proven time and again.

Interestingly, in our modern world, countries like Japan provide instructive initiatives, for instance, to encourage weight loss: In 2008, Japan introduced the "Metabo" law, which requires Japanese citizens between the ages of 40 and 74 to meet certain waistline measurements each year!

Yet Gandhi's model offers a more far-reaching transformative solution. His approach emphasized individual responsibility for health, self-discipline, and harmony with nature, all the while rejecting dependence on exploitative medical-industrial complexes.

Gandhi's Experiments with Nature Cure

Gandhi's model of health care through Nature Cure is embedded in the concept of *Swadeshi* (local) that is rooted in *Swasthavalamban* (self-health-reliance). His initiation into nature cure began with his commitment to vegetarianism which he saw as being spiritually aligned with nature. He insisted that man didn't have to kill to eat. Rather he believed that humans need not kill to sustain themselves and advocated a plant-based diet as the healthiest, most economical, and most humane way of life. Besides, he stressed that a vegetarian diet makes efficient use of land and fosters values of nonviolence and humanitarianism.

In particular, while Gandhi was studying law in London in the 1880s, he was influenced by books like Henry Salt's *A Plea to Vegetarianism* (1886), Howard William's *The Ethics of Diet* (1883) Anna Kingford's *The Perfect Way in Diet* (1881). A few years later, his convictions were further reinforced by books such

as Louis Kuhne's *The New Science of Healing* (1894), and Adolf Just's *Return to Nature: Paradise Regained* (1896).

His experiments with nature cure started during his stay in South Africa. Like a true researcher he went on to experiment with himself first before working on others. Then, he went on to use Nature Cure methods on his family members, inmates of the ashram, and associates who reached for his healing hand. Boer war victims and plague affected patients received his Nature Cure treatments such as mud packs, cold pack, tub bath, massage, diet plans, walking, air and sun baths, prayer, and so on. Yet, he had experimented everything on himself first. Like any other scientist he was also faced with many failures which was another form of learning for him.

Some of his notable experiments (which are perhaps even more relevant today) included:

- Pleurisy Treatment (1888–1891)
- Management of Pneumonic Plague (1904)
- Kasturba's Haemorrhage Treatment (1908)
- Use of Mud Poultices for Constipation (1903–1913)
- Fasting for Mental Clarity (1903–1913)
- Wet Sheet Pack Treatment of Typhoid and Pneumonia for his son Manilal (1912)
- Fractured Arm Treatment for his son Ramdas (1914)

All these treatments were practised during his stay in South Africa, some of which were continued after his return to India in 1915. Other notable ones were his historical three 21-dayfasts, morning and evening walks and prayers, sun baths, massages, unfired food experiments, nursing the Sanskrit scholar Parachuri Shastri who suffered from Leprosy, diet experiments, Malaria treatment, mud poultices on abdomen and head for constipation and

hypertension; all these were conducted in India alongside his political activism during the freedom struggle.

Gandhi's life was an open book, every information, including the finer details, on all the above-mentioned experiments were either recorded by himself or by others who were taking part in these experiments, and are now available in the public domain.

The Philosophy of Nature Cure

For Gandhi, Nature Cure was not merely a method of healing but a way of life. It demanded a fundamental shift in one's outlook, aligning life with the laws of health. Rejecting dependency on hospitals and charity, Gandhi believed that Nature Cure fostered self-reliance and self-respect. As he wrote in *Harijan* (June 2, 1946):

“Nature cure means a change for the better in one's outlook and on life itself. It means regulation of one's life in accordance with laws of health. It is not a matter of taking free medicine from the hospital or for fees. A man who takes free treatment from the hospital accepts charity. The man who accepts Nature Cure never begs. Self-help enhances self-respect. He takes steps to cure himself by eliminating poisons from the system, and a man who accepts Nature Cure never begs. Self-help enhances self-respect. He takes steps to cure himself by eliminating poisons from the system and prevents future illness.”

Gandhi's mass movements were not limited to the political struggle for freedom, for which large scale campaigns were planned every 10 years. Yet, during the inactive phases of the freedom movement, he laid down 18 Constructive Programmes to be adopted by his Satyagrahis, or nonviolent political workers. Health, nutrition, dietetics, hygiene and sanitation received prime priority. However, they were complemented by the removal of untouchability, the prohibition of liquor, the support of khadi production, village industries, the

introduction of new education, empowering women's role in society, attention to peasants and agricultural communities, the allocation of special importance to *Adivasis*, and last but not least, striving for economic equality. All these programmes played a crucial role in ensuring public health, which can be considered a by-product of all human activities put together.

Gandhi's Contributions to Public Health

Few recognize Gandhi as a pioneering public health specialist. Though he initially aspired to be a doctor, his aversion to animal dissection led him to study law. However, his later training in nursing during his time in South Africa equipped him to treat Boer War casualties and plague victims. This hands-on experience deepened his understanding of public health.

While Gandhi respected all systems of medicine, he favoured preventive care and Nature Cure over conventional treatments. Yet, he also sought medical advice when needed, consulting luminaries like Dr. Sushila Nayyar, Dr. Jivraj Mehta, and Dr. P. J. Mehta.

Institutionalizing Nature Cure

Gandhi's dedication to Nature Cure culminated in the establishment of the All India Nature Cure Foundation Trust on November 18, 1945. This trust deed, the only one signed by Gandhi, aimed to make natural healing accessible to all.

When questioned by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel about taking on such a responsibility at the age of 76, Gandhi replied:

“When I go to God, He will ask me: ‘I sent Dinshah [Dr. Dinshah Mehta, a Nature Cure physician] into your life. What use did you make of him?’ Then, what shall I reply?”

Dated 25th March 1946, in *Harijan*, Gandhi wrote an article with the title: *“Why one more burden?”*

Why have I got involved in Nature Cure in the evening of my life? Had I not enough work on my hand already? Could anyone expect me to add to my existing burden? [...] but they do not echo within me. I have confidence in my capacity having followed Nature Cure as a hobby for over a half century.”

In honour of Gandhi’s commitment, the Indian Government declared November 18 as “Naturopathy Day” in 2018. Today, naturopaths across India celebrate this day with programs aimed at empowering individuals to lead healthier lives through natural methods.

Gandhi’s vision of *Swasthavalamban* (self-reliance in health) and *Swadeshi* (local self-sufficiency) remains a timeless blueprint for addressing the current health crisis. His life’s work challenges us to question our dependence on costly medical systems and inspires us to reconnect with nature’s healing power.

Gandhi’s Brahmacharya and its Role in Health and Balance

Mahatma Gandhi’s approach to health transcended physical well-being and delved into the moral and spiritual dimensions of life. He famously said: “...No man whose character is not pure can be said to be really healthy: the body which contains a diseased mind can never be anything but diseased.” For Gandhi, health was not just an absence of physical ailments, but a state of harmony between the body, mind, and spirit. A pure character, he believed, was the foundation of true health, and evil thoughts and passions were manifestations of internal disease. In his own words, he articulated it as follows:

“A pure character is the foundation of health in the real sense of the term, and we say that all evil thoughts and evil passions are but different forms of diseases.”

Brahmacharya: A Tool for Balance

Perhaps the most controversial and least understood of Gandhi's philosophies is his practice of *Brahmacharya*. Often reduced to celibacy, *Brahmacharya* was, for Gandhi, a broader principle of self-restraint and self-discipline. In fact, he believed that through *Brahmacharya* one could achieve *moksha*. More prosaically, he viewed it as a moral imperative to regulate one's desires, both physical and material, as a way to cultivate inner peace and strengthen character.

In today's context, *Brahmacharya* offers profound insights into addressing issues of overproduction, consumerism, and the strain they place on human relationships and the environment. Gandhi saw uncontrolled desires—whether for material possessions, food, or sensory pleasures—as the root cause of societal and environmental imbalance. He also believed that his own diet was a statement against violence towards animals and a way to maintain physical and mental purity. Further, he advocated for the conscious distinction between 'needs' and 'wants', urging individuals to embrace simplicity and restraint as guiding principles.

Gandhi's eleven vows, also known as 'eleven *vratas*' or 'eleven principles', were designed to cultivate these qualities. More specifically, these 11 vows were as follows: 1) *Ahimsa*: Nonviolence, 2) *Satya*: Truth, 3) *Asteya*: Non-stealing, 4) *Brahmacharya*: Self-control or celibacy, 5) *Asanagraha*: Renunciation of possession, 6) *Sharir shram*: Bread labour or physical labour, 7) *Asvada*: Control of the palate, 8) *Swadeshi*: Self-reliance or duty towards one's neighbour, 9) *Sarv Dharma Sambhav*: Equal respect for all religions, 10) *Abhaya*: Fearlessness on all occasions, 11) *Asparsh*: No untouchability.

The first five vows are found in most religions of the world and are known as the *Pancha Mahavrata*s or 'Five great vows'. The remaining six vows are considered new ideas that were given importance to meet the needs of the time. According to him, the practice of *Brahmacharya* (restraint), supplemented by *Sharir shram* (physical labour), and *Asanagraha* (non-possession) in the light of

Swadeshi (self-reliance), acting as an anchoring tool, enables one to take informed decisions in order to make life easy for oneself, for others and for future generations.

The Role of *Asvada* in Health and Character

Gandhi placed particular emphasis on *Asvada*, or control of the palate, as it directly supported *Brahmacharya*. He believed that conquering one's taste was a gateway to mastering other senses. Eating, according to Gandhi, should not be for pleasure but for sustenance and maintaining the body's equilibrium. He argued:

“When each organ of sense subserves the body, and through the body the soul, its special relish disappears. Then alone does it begin to function as nature intended.”

This principle holds great relevance today, as modern societies grapple with health issues like obesity, lifestyle diseases, and food wastage—all consequences of over-indulgence and lack of restraint. Gandhi's approach offers a timeless reminder of the need to cultivate mindful consumption, not only for personal health but also for global sustainability.

Trusteeship: A Philosophy for Economic and Environmental Health

Gandhi's vision extended beyond personal health to encompass societal and environmental well-being. He famously said:

“The earth, the air, the water, the land are not only an inheritance from our forefathers but also a loan from our children.”

His philosophy of **trusteeship** encapsulates this sentiment. Wealth and resources, Gandhi believed, are not personal possessions but trusts held for the collective welfare of society. By practising non-possession and promoting

equitable distribution of resources, individuals and communities can ensure that future generations inherit a healthy, sustainable planet.

This philosophy is particularly pertinent today, as humanity faces the twin crises of economic inequality and environmental degradation. Gandhi's principles encourage a shift from exploitative consumerism to a model of stewardship, where individual well-being is inextricably linked to the health of the planet.

Nature Cure and Self-Reliance

Gandhi's approach to health culminates in his ultimate dictum: *"The man who accepts Nature Cure never begs. Self-help enhances self-respect."*

He advocated for a proactive approach to health, where individuals take responsibility for maintaining their well-being rather than relying on external systems like insurance or pharmaceuticals. This philosophy aligns with his broader principles of *Swasthavalamban* (self-health-reliance) and *Swadeshi*, emphasizing the importance of local, sustainable practices in achieving holistic health.

A Legacy of Health and Empowerment

Gandhi's principles—nonviolence, self-discipline, non-possession, and self-reliance—continue to resonate in the modern world. His life serves as a testament to the power of these values in fostering health, harmony, and resilience.

Inspired by his vision, numerous naturopathy centres were established across India during the freedom struggle, driven by a commitment to creating a *Rog-Mukt Bharat* (disease-free India). These centres, along with countless

individuals who continue to follow his methods, exemplify the enduring relevance of Gandhi's teachings.

In many ways, Gandhi's ideas represent the original "Make in India" philosophy, given that he emphasised the principle and practice of *Swadeshi*. Rooted in self-reliance, simplicity, and sustainability, his approach offers a blueprint for building a healthier and more equitable society.

Conclusion: A Timeless Guide to Health

Gandhi's holistic view of health—integrating physical, mental, and spiritual well-being—provides a timeless framework for addressing the challenges of modern life. By embracing his principles of restraint, self-reliance, and harmony with nature, individuals and societies can work towards a future that prioritizes health over profit, balance over excess, and sustainability over exploitation.

In a world increasingly dominated by consumerism, pollution, and lifestyle-related diseases, Gandhi's teachings are not just a historical legacy—they are a call to action. His life and philosophy remind us that the path to true health lies in simplicity, mindfulness, and respect for the interconnectedness of all life.

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