

Chapter 2: Eating Right – The Mahatma’s Way

Long before regulatory bodies were set up to monitor food quality and nutritionists advised people on what to eat, Mahatma Gandhi wrote and preached extensively on the subject. For him food and eating needed both – mindfulness and moderation – a message still relevant today. He was also a known advocate of hygiene and sanitation.

Eating safe

Mahatma Gandhi once said that it was a matter of great sorrow and shame that rampant adulteration existed in essential food stuffs such as oil and ghee in the bazaars of pre-independence India. He encouraged people to never be satisfied with whatever is available commercially and be very patient and diligent in procuring good quality food. If necessary, he even advocated the use of hand pressed oil. He also worried about the risk of infections getting passed on from diseased cattle, given that in his time such safeguards were not in place. He called for change in the status quo through appropriate legislation and education.

The Mahatma was a torch bearer for change in the sorry state of sanitation in pre-Independence India. He is known to have said, "Cleanliness is next to Godliness". He proclaimed that unless we "rid ourselves of our dirty habits and have improved latrines, Swaraj can have no value for us." Side by side with the struggle for India's independence, Bapu strived to improve sanitation, cleanliness and waste management. He dealt with these problems in meticulous detail and at a systemic level, including all aspects viz. social, technical and economic. He stressed on the direct link between sanitation and disease and called for people to raise their standards of hygiene.

His desire for each house, even in the villages, to have a latrine was visionary, to say the least, in a poor country saddled with multiple issues and struggling for its independence. The "Swachh Bharat Abhiyan" launched in 2014 ingrains the principles preached by the Mahatma.

Eating Healthy

“It is health that is real wealth and not pieces of gold and silver”

– Mahatma Gandhi

Gandhiji preached more than 75 years back what a modern nutritionist recommends even today. He encouraged people to consume cereals that had been hand ground without sieving to retain the nourishment and roughage provided by the husk. He placed great emphasis on the fact that polished rice or wheat flour devoid of its bran supplies only pure starch to the body and should be avoided.

Gandhiji acknowledged the role played by pulses in providing an economical source of protein to those who could not afford milk. However, he was not in favour of pulses to be consumed too frequently especially by those in a sedentary occupation on account of the fact that most pulses were difficult to digest.

He placed great importance on consumption of fresh vegetables and decried the fact that these were often unavailable at reasonable prices, especially in rural India. He prioritised green leafy vegetables and said that certain vegetables viz. cucumber, tomatoes, mustard, garden cress (*Chandrashoor*) and other tender leaves need not be cooked and should be washed properly and eaten raw in small quantities. He de-emphasised potatoes, sweet potatoes and yam, which he classified along with starch-supplying cereals.

On fruits, Gandhiji recommended a diet inclusive of seasonal fruits, e.g. mangoes, grapes etc. He said that the best time for taking fruits is in the morning. According to him a perfect breakfast consisted of milk and fruits, especially banana. He felt that the juice of two sour limes should be taken every day in water or with vegetables.

Gandhiji preferred the use of ghee over oil as he felt that ghee was easier to digest and nutritionally superior to oil. He lamented the undue prominence given to sugar, especially by city folk through their over-consumption of milk-based sweets and warned of the harmful effects of sugar. For both, fats and sweets he recommended moderation.

Gandhiji initially considered milk to be an animal product and felt that it had no place in a vegetarian diet. Moreover, his view was that man had no moral right to consume any other milk other than mother's milk in infancy. However, after a severe bout of dysentery and resultant extreme loss of weight, he reluctantly accepted medical advice to take goat's milk to overcome his malnutrition. He acknowledged the beneficial impact that it had on his recovery and revised his original opposition to milk. He also recommended milk for being a source of protein which was relatively easy to digest as compared to vegetarian sources of protein.

Gandhiji's frequent fasting as a part of his Satyagraha movement is also well known. But for him, fasting was not only a means to rally the masses to a cause but also a path to good health. Prior to commencement of a fast he would usually fortify himself with lemon juice honey and warm water. Importantly, he also believed that fasting was the "truest prayer" and that it cleansed the soul and led to spiritual upliftment.

In fasting, Gandhiji proved his prescience. It is only recently that science has recognised the benefits of fasting in detoxification of the body and utilisation of unused fat deposits, amongst many others. The 2016 Nobel Laureate, Dr Yoshinori Ohsumi discovered the process of autophagy through which the body degrades and recycles damaged cells, proteins and toxins. Other benefits such as a decreased risk of diabetes and cardiovascular disease, protection from cancer and inflammation, balanced lipid profiles, lower blood pressure etc. are also known to be associated with fasting.

Eating Sustainable

Mahatma Gandhi's principle of non-violence is very well known across the world. But not many may be aware that his principle extended beyond how we treat our fellow human beings to how we treat the denizens of the animal kingdom. Indeed, his strong espousal of vegetarianism was rooted in that thought. He famously said, "Man was not born a carnivorous animal, but born to live on fruits and herbs that the earth grows".

Gandhiji preferred a simple diet of brown rice and seasonal, locally grown vegetables and snacks made of plantain with groundnut paste. He opted for jaggery rather than refined

sugar as a sweetener. His advocacy of a whole-food and a plant-based diet is in harmony with the latest scientific research that proclaims this as the healthiest way to eat. He was thus, in many ways, much ahead of his times as a champion for healthy and sustainable eating, decades before organic foods became the rage they are now, or the term “superfood” was even coined.

Eating Mindfully

Gandhiji knew of the fact that carbohydrate digestion begins in the mouth. He recommended that carbohydrate rich foods like *chapati* should not be dipped in *dals* and curries before eating. Instead they should be eaten separately- in the dry form. This way they would demand more chewing and hence greater saliva production resulting in better digestibility. He believed that good mastication helped in better digestion of food. He was also very particular about his meal timings and felt it was enough to eat three main meals. He frowned upon nibbling in between meals.

Gandhiji regarded food as a source of energy and of curative powers, rather than merely a means to satisfy one’s palate and hence encouraged moderation in eating. He opined that gastronomical pleasure should come from the satisfaction of real hunger and that relish is dependent upon hunger and not outside it. We all need to train our bodies to be self-aware of what our system really requires rather than indulge in consumption without need or thought.

Mankind would benefit greatly by paying heed to his approach and pivot its largely obsessive and hedonistic association with food and drink to one that is more sustainable and need based.

References

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