

# Gandhian Naturopathy: A Critical Appraisal

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**Abstract:** Seeking an alternative to Allopathic Medicine, Mahatma Gandhi, a champion of peace and non-violence, tested natural remedies on himself and his followers throughout his life. This paper revisits the system of Medicine which Gandhi practiced and promoted, what he called Naturopathy or nature-cure. Gandhi's complex thoughts are often reduced to binaries like Indian versus Western, modern versus traditional, scientific versus irrational, secular versus faith-based. This paper questions these binaries, and attempts to highlight that Gandhian Naturopathy goes beyond them. The paper is an attempt to enrich the understanding of Gandhi's philosophy through the study of his ideas on Medicine.

**Keywords:** alternative medicine, health, Mahatma Gandhi, naturopathy.

## 1. Introduction

Mahatma Gandhi was trained as a barrister, but as a young man he had aspired to be a doctor (Gandhi, [1909] 1997). Gandhi's family did not allow him to pursue Medicine, yet his interest in the subject of health did not waver. Throughout his life, Gandhi tested natural remedies on himself and his followers. He wrote *A Guide to Health* (1923) and *Key to Health* (1948), in which he discussed ways to keep the body healthy. Gandhi's views on Medicine also appeared in *Hind Swaraj* ([1909] 1997) and *Autobiography: My Experiments with Truth* ([1927] 1959). Recent scholars have questioned the dominance of allopathic Medicine (Bakx, 1991; Siahpush, 1998; Le Fanu, 2011), and a need has been felt for an alternative system of Medicine. Gandhi had also questioned mainstream Western Medicine. What was the Gandhian alternative? This paper revisits the system of Medicine which Gandhi practiced and promoted, what he called Naturopathy or nature-cure. Is Gandhian Naturopathy Indian or Western? Modern or traditional? Scientific or irrational? Secular or faith-based? Through this paper, I

want to question these binaries which Gandhi's complex thoughts are often reduced to. My paper would help understand that Gandhian thought went beyond these binaries.

Gandhian Naturopathy differs from the Western understanding of Naturopathy. In Western literature, Naturopathy is a system of alternative Medicine. Alternative Medicine are practices claimed to have healing effects which are disproven, unproven, or impossible to prove (Nath, 2006). Unlike mainstream Western Medicine which is evidence-based, Naturopathy emphasizes on the prevention, treatment and promotion of optimal health using therapeutic methods which encourage the body's self-healing process. In Europe, modern Naturopathy emerged from alternative Medicine systems developed in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (WHO, 2010). In Germany, Naturopathy evolved from hydrotherapy or water-cure developed by Vincent Priessnitz (1799-1851) and Father Sebastian Kneipp (1821-1897), and the nature-cure practices developed by Dr. Louis Kuhne (1823-1907) and Dr. Arnold Rickli (1823-1926). German naturopaths spread Naturopathy all over Europe. In North America, Dr. Benedict Lust (1872-1945) established Naturopathy, deriving it from Kuhne's nature cure practices which emphasized regular exercise, exposure to sunlight and fresh air, vegetarianism, and detoxification. While the term Naturopathy grew popular after Lust founded the American School of Naturopathy in 1901, it was originally coined in 1885 by German naturopath John Scheel (Baer, 2001).

Gandhi drew on this literature. He was influenced by Kuhne's texts on nature-cure and the book *Return to Nature: Paradise Regained* ([1904] 1996) by German naturopath Adolf Just. In a letter to a foreign naturopath in 1947, Gandhi wrote "I became a confirmed convert to nature cure when I read Kuhne's *New Science of Healing* and Just's *Return to Nature* over forty years ago." Gandhi was guided by these writings, yet he developed an original

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philosophy. Before I proceed and introduce my analysis, I would like to comment briefly on the existing writings on Gandhian Medicine.

## 2. Analysis of Existing Literature

In order to understand Gandhian Naturopathy, we need to place it in the context of Gandhi's views on Health and Medicine. In this section, I have critically discussed the existing literature on Gandhi's views on these subjects. I have discussed the literature chronologically to learn how this topic has been understood over the years. I have reviewed four papers which discuss Gandhi's views on Health and Medicine. I chose these papers because they place particular emphasis on Gandhian Naturopathy.

I begin my discussion with Koilpillai Charles, who was a Professor in the Department of Economics at Lakehead University in Canada. In 1979, he published a paper titled "Gandhi's Views on Health" in the *American Journal of Religion and Health* (Charles, 1979). Charles presented Gandhi as a *great experimental scientist* who constantly revised his beliefs through investigation. Charles argued that Gandhi's philosophy on health was "tested on the touchstone of his own personal experience". His paper discussed Gandhi's *experiments* with naturopathy, vegetarianism, *Bramacharya*, and cleanliness. Charles said that while Gandhi referred to German texts on Naturopathy, his practice had several distinctive and novel features derived from experimentation. Charles argued that the Indians' sense of "national inferiority" has fostered a "myth of the infallibility of the allopathic system of medicine". He said that India's acceptance of the Western way of life as a model has also led to the acceptance of many flawed Western conceptions. Charles used scientific terms to present Gandhian Naturopathy as an indigenous system, even while he mentions that Naturopathy evolved in Europe and Gandhi replicated techniques from German texts to treat himself and others. Charles appears biased and over-zealous to prove the Indian-ness of Gandhi's Naturopathy.

In 2004, Nisha Ahir of Miami University, United States of America published her doctoral dissertation titled "Mahatma Gandhi, MD?" Ahir argued that Gandhi is misrepresented as "antiscience" due to his indictment of modern civilization, and made a case that Gandhi should be understood as a scientist (Ahir, 2004). She observed that while Gandhi's views on science appear in *A Guide to Health, Key to Health, and Autobiography: My Experiments with Truth*, this part of his writing has not been analyzed by scholars. Ahir argues that Gandhi "was a scientist by its very definition" and cited the Webster dictionary's definition of a scientist as "a scientific

investigator; one devoted to scientific study." She further argues that Gandhi was obsessed with experimentation which is why he used the word "experiments" in the title of his autobiography. She claimed that when Gandhi used Naturopathy to treat himself and others he was conducting experiments. According to Ahir, Gandhi's affinity for Naturopathy came from the *Swadeshi* policy. She is of the belief that Gandhi wanted all measures of health to come from India and be attainable by the rich and poor alike. Ahir overlooks the element of faith in Gandhi's Naturopathy. Gandhi laid as much emphasis on prayers as much he laid on science. She also, as mentioned above, wrongly believes that Naturopathy is indigenous; as we know it evolved in the West and Gandhi referred to German texts on nature-cure.

In her paper "The Quack Whom We Know: Illness and Nursing in Gandhi" in *Rethinking Gandhi and Nonviolent Relationality: Global Perspectives* (2007), Sandhya Shetty, a Professor at the University of New Hampshire in the United States, called Gandhian method a form of quackery (Shetty, 2007). While Charles and Ahir presented Gandhi as a scientist, Shetty looked at Gandhi's "love for the ill and illness" as the basis of his brand of quackery. Her paper emphasized irrationalism in Gandhi's method. She argues that Gandhi's indictment of mainstream Medicine was a product of his obsession with nursing and dietetic asceticism. Shetty argued that Gandhi's experiments expressed a reckless disregard of the imperative to preserve life at all costs - an imperative shared by Western Medicine and Ayurveda. Some of the methods which Gandhi used were indeed questionable. However, Shetty's claim that Gandhi loved the ill and illness seems dubious to me. While discussing illness, Gandhi had maintained that diseases were mistakes caused by negligence or indulgence. To argue this point he used examples of overeating, indigestion, and diseases caused due to narcotics, alcohol and tobacco in *Hind Swaraj and Key to Health*.

Another scholar, Persis Latika Dass of the Department of History at Sophia Girls' College in Rajasthan, argued that Gandhian Naturopathy was rooted in indigenous philosophy and faith. In her paper, "Timeless Efficacy of Gandhian Key to Health - Vegetarianism and Natural Therapeutics" (2015) Dass claimed that to Gandhi "the human body was a wonderful and perfect machine that could be set right without medicines". Therefore, he sought causes and remedies of illness in Naturopathy. Dass' paper described what she identified as the seven elements of Gandhian Naturopathy: Earth, Water, Sunlight, Ether, Air, Fasting and *Ramanama*. I differ with her categorization of fasting as an element separate from

*akash* (ether). In the section on *akash* in *Key to Health*, Gandhi had discussed fasting as a technique to create *akash* within the body. Dass also argued that *Ramanama* was the “number one therapeutic for Gandhiji”. She argued that Gandhian Naturopathy involved a transformation of one’s life through faith in God. Dass claimed that Gandhi equated a sinless body with a healthy one, and that *Ramanama* could create this sinless body. Dass incorporated Hinduism into Gandhian Naturopathy while Gandhi had used secular language in his writings on the subject. Although she mentioned the German texts which influenced Gandhi, she presented Gandhian Naturopathy as an indigenous and timeless system of health firmly rooted in Hinduism.

The four papers I have analyzed limit Gandhian Naturopathy to different sides of the binaries discussed in the introduction. Koilpillai Charles, Nisha Ahir, and Persis Latika Dass looked at Gandhi’s system as a traditional alternative to the *modern* system of Western Medicine. Despite acknowledging the influence Western Naturopathy had on Gandhi, they presented his nature-cure as an Indian system of Medicine. While they see Gandhian Naturopathy as indigenous, they also see it as a scientific, rational model capable of serving the needs of modern-day India. Conversely, Sandhya Shetty perceived Gandhi as an unscientific, irrational quack whose methods were driven by his obsession with illness. She contended that the Gandhian method goes against both Indian and Western systems of Medicine. With regard to the religious nature of Gandhian Naturopathy, while Dass focused on the element of Hinduism in Gandhi’s method, Charles and Ahir chose to downplay his spirituality to support their understanding of Gandhi as a secular scientist. There is much inconsistency in the existing literature. In the light of this material, it becomes difficult to understand Gandhian Naturopathy. I attempt to resolve this inconsistency by discussing the evolution of Gandhi’s views on Medicine in the following section.

### 3. Understanding Gandhian Naturopathy

In this section I have discussed Gandhi’s intellectual journey to understand how Gandhi’s ideas on Medicine developed over time. Gandhi was not always a critic of mainstream Western Medicine. In *Key to Health* (1948), he wrote that while living in South Africa, he had relied on medication prescribed by an orthodox allopathic practitioner. Gandhi observed that these drugs were not doing him any good, and felt that they compromised his sense of general well-being. He soon developed an interest in nature-cure methods but lacked practical knowledge of their usage. He gained this knowledge after reading German naturopath Adolf Just’s *Return to*

*Nature: Paradise Regained* ([1904] 1996). Just’s philosophy of Medicine underscored a “return to nature” approach. It involved consuming all-natural food and clean water, breathing in fresh air, and spending solitary hours in nature. Just suggested using mud poultices to treat headaches, boils and constipation, and Gandhi replicated these treatments with much success. The second book which profoundly influenced him was *New Science of Healing* ([1899] 1998) written by another German Naturopath, Louise Kuhne. It introduced Gandhi to hydrotherapy, and fueled experiments in which he used baths to alleviate fever, and improve digestion.

Gandhi’s background also influenced his ideas. Gandhi’s affinity for nature-cure can be linked to his family’s religious sect, *Vaishnavism*. As mentioned above, Gandhi’s family did not allow him to pursue Medicine as *Vaishnavism* forbade vivisection. Later in life he deemed the practice ethically unacceptable. Gandhi wrote in the newspaper *Young India* (1925a), “I abhor vivisection with my whole soul. I detest the unpardonable slaughter of innocent life in the name of science and humanity so-called, and all the scientists’ discoveries stained with innocent blood I count of no consequence.” Gandhi’s criticized Western Medicine not because it was Western, but because he found it immoral. His critique was not shaped by cultural nationalism, but by a sense of immorality which he felt Western Medicine promoted. While the conduct of practitioners of mainstream Western Medicine appealed to Gandhi (Gandhi, 1921), his writings provide at least four arguments against mainstream Western Medicine. Firstly, he felt it restricted treatment to the rich by charging high fees. On the other hand, Naturopathy would benefit the poor by enabling them to use elements of nature instead of spending money in hospitals, which he refers to as “institutions for propagating sin” (Gandhi, [1909] 1997). Secondly, the science of modern Medicine clashed with Gandhi’s view that spirituality was a prerequisite for good health. He believed that religious conduct conserved both the spirit and the body, and a man who attended to his daily *Namaz* or *Gayatri* in the proper spirit “need never get ill.” Gandhi felt that modern Medicine was “divorced from religion” as its practitioners harboured a desperate desire to prolong lives, going against God by injecting drugs into patients’ on their death beds (Gandhi, 1921). Third, Gandhi had ethical qualms about vivisection as mentioned above, and he also condemned the use of animal fat and spirituous liquors in drugs (Gandhi, [1909] 1997). Lastly, he claimed that Medicines went against self-control since diseases were a result of negligence or indulgence. To Gandhi, falling ill was a matter of shame as illness implied a mistake. He believed that being cured by doctors and

pills led patients to repeat their mistakes, and by relying on doctors and pills they lost self-control, becoming effeminate (Gandhi, [1909] 1997).

Instead of reproducing the methods of nature-cure given in reputed books, Gandhi gave Naturopathy a new theoretical framework. In *Key to Health*, he placed the therapeutics of nature-cure treatment into categories drawn from the system of *pancha mahabhuta* or the “five great elements” found in the Vedas. These are: *bhūmi* (earth), *jala* (water), *tejas* or *agni* (fire), *vayu* (air), *vyom* or *shunya* (space or zero) or *akash* (ether or void) (Singh, 2017). Gandhi also placed emphasis on spiritual purity as a requirement of good health. He maintained that a body which contained a diseased mind would be perennially prone to disease. It is crucial to note that Gandhi did not consider nature-cure a course of treatment – it was a way of life. Unlike the doctor or the *Vaidya*, the naturopath studied health and not a particular ailment. His job was not to sell a cure to the patient, but to encourage him to adopt a healthier lifestyle. The naturopath would teach the patient how to transform his life in a way that left no room for disease. In 1946, Gandhi wrote in *Harijan* that the naturopath’s interest would begin where the ordinary doctor’s ended; the eradication of the patient’s ailment under nature cure marked the beginning of a healthier life (Gandhi, 1946).

Two systems of Medicine can be closely linked to nationalism in India: Ayurveda and nature-cure. Of these, Ayurveda is a distinctly indigenous system of Medicine on account of its association with Indic philosophy and classical Sanskrit literature while nature-cure can be traced to Western texts. Naturopathy is based on a theory of the body that is superficially similar to Ayurveda, but fundamentally and historically has nothing to do with it (Alter, 2014). Gandhi practiced and endorsed nature-cure and not Ayurveda. This tells us that his position on Medicine was not based on empty revivalism. Gandhi (1925b) wrote that “while I do like everything ancient and noble, I utterly dislike making a parody of it.” As a man who spent much of his life conducting *experiments*, his qualms were not with Ayurveda as a discipline, but with the physicians who merely capitalized its past glories without new research. Gandhi felt that Ayurveda had become a stagnant system due to the complacency of its practitioners who did not examine it to grasp those secrets which were hidden from the world. He urged them to conduct inquiry which would revive the Ayurvedic system (Gandhi, 1921).

While Gandhi’s attitude towards Ayurveda became critical, his attitude towards Western Medicine became

more positive as he reached middle age. In 1919, he was treated for piles by a certain Dr. Dalal in Bombay. The operation was so successful that Gandhi began urging friends with any hint of piles to consult Dr. Dalal. Later in 1921, Gandhi was asked to inaugurate a Medical College in Delhi, whose prime mover was the celebrated Unani specialist, Hakim Ajmal Khan. In his speech Gandhi said:

“I would like to pay my humble tribute to the spirit of research that fires the modern scientists. My quarrel is not against that spirit. My complaint is against the direction that the spirit has taken... but I have nothing but praise for the zeal, industry and sacrifice that have animated the modern scientists in the pursuit after truth... Let our *Kavirajs*, *Vaidyas* and *Hakims* apply to their calling a scientific spirit that Western physicians show, let them copy the latter’s humility, let them reduce themselves to poverty in investigating the indigenous drugs and let them frankly acknowledge and assimilate that part of Western medicine which they do not at present possess.”

The shift in Gandhi’s views on allopathy is evident in a letter he wrote in 1933 to Thomas Titus, a prominent leader in the Civil Disobedience Movement:

“Though I should like to believe to the contrary, I am driven to the conclusion that 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. If therefore allopathy rids itself of the worship of mammon, which has overtaken most human activities, and could exclude vivisection and other practices which I call black, and liberally take advantage of the new methods discovered by lay people, it would become all-satisfying and quite inexpensive.”

In this section, I have chronologically discussed Gandhi’s views on Medicine. My analysis reveals that Gandhi was a strong critic of mainstream Western Medicine in his

youth, and he found an alternative to it in Naturopathy which he practiced and promoted throughout his life. In Gandhi's later years, positive experiences with allopathy changed his perception of Western Medicine. However, he never became an unqualified admirer, and remained critical of those allopathic practices which he considered immoral. Gandhi was also a critic of modern-day Ayurveda, and while he revered ancient Ayurvedic texts, he believed that this system was stuck in the past due to the complacency of its practitioners. The system of health which Gandhi promoted was not purely Indian or Western, modern or traditional, scientific or irrational, secular or faith-based - it was a blend of the positive elements of all the systems of Medicine he encountered in his lifetime. Gandhi wrote in 1921 that the ideal system of health would be a fusion of different systems of Medicine which would result "in a harmonious blending, and in purging each of its special defects" (Gandhi, 1921).

#### 4. Conclusion

In a bid to draw legitimacy from Mahatma Gandhi, his thoughts are often nationalized. The narrow appropriation of Gandhi as a nationalist icon misses the universalism which underlies Gandhian philosophy and practice. Both Gandhi's critics and admirers have, quoting selectively, presented him as opposed to orthodox Western Medicine. However, a chronological analysis of his views on Medicine shows that this was not the case. Once a strong critic of orthodox Western Medicine, Gandhi eventually came to appreciate its uses. Moreover, Gandhi had no qualms about revisiting his beliefs whenever he came across new information. In *Key to Health* (1948) he wrote:

"I am not at all concerned with appearing to be consistent. In my search after Truth, I have discarded many ideas and learnt many new things... What I am concerned with is my readiness to obey the call of Truth, my God, from moment to moment, and therefore when anybody finds any inconsistency between any two writings of mine, if he has still faith in my sanity, he would do well to choose the latter of the two on the same subject."

Thus, Gandhi's philosophy was complex, and binaries like Indian versus Western, modern versus traditional, scientific versus irrational, secular versus faith-based only limit our understanding of his thoughts. As Gandhian scholars Lloyd and Susanne Rudolph wrote in *Postmodern Gandhi* (2010):

"Gandhi's charismatic leadership was in part historically determined, rooted in the aspects of tradition he interpreted for his time... we need to challenge a common notion of Gandhi as a traditionalist or a back number. He was neither. Gandhi challenged both the old and new established orders."

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