

Gandhiji's Interest in Nursing, Medicine & Health

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In a striking passage in his book "My experiments with truth" Gandhiji wrote that there had been two passions in his life, the British Constitution and Nursing. A strange combination no doubt. That he had grave doubts about the British Constitution became evident in *Hind Swaraj*, and after the Rowlatt Act Gandhiji's faith in British justice and the parliamentary system was never quite the same again. But his passion for nursing remained.

In his early years in London, as a student, Gandhiji was associated with vegetarians and nature cure enthusiasts. Some people may look on these interests as yet another example of his fads. This was not really so. Gandhiji always had in mind forms of nutrition and medical care which could be made available to the toiling masses. Sophisticated diets and medicines were not (and we must confess are still not) within the reach of the poor villagers. It was therefore necessary that a few people should experiment (and he insisted that in quite a pragmatic way, the experimenter should always begin with himself) and find out what would be good for health. Throughout his life he experimented with different sorts of food and his personal correspondence abounds in suggestions about all this to his friends.

Gandhiji's work in the ambulance corps in the Boer and Zulu wars gave him first hand experience of nursing. It also confirmed him in his hatred of violence. He could see for himself how war mangles the flesh and the spirit. Gandhiji's nursing experience in the South African period of his life included his devoted care of Gokhale who was a diabetic, and his delivery of Devdas in the absence of any professional help at the confinement. At one stage he did voluntary duty for a certain number of hours each day at a hospital and gained valuable knowledge of the problems of indentured labourers in this way.

Back in India in 1915 on a visit to Santiniketan we read of Gandhi's boiled diet being specially prepared. Rabindranath Tagore's 'loochis' were looked at askance by Mahatmaji who remarked that they were veritable poison as far as health was concerned. "Then it must be very slow poison" the great poet replied with a twinkle in his eye. Imprisoned in Yervada Jail he himself sucked out the poison from a scorpion bite which an African had sustained. Two years later in 1924, Gandhiji was operated on for appendicitis in Poona. As a hospital patient he had to wear the regulation dress and it was sore trial to him to leave his *khadi* clothes behind, but he sub-

mitted with a good grace to the hospital discipline. Similarly in Noakhali when he suffered some skin trouble on account of the hot sticky climate, this fervid believer in the virtues of the mud poultice allowed the doctor among the volunteers to apply Cibazol ointment to the affected parts. This was not inconsistency but common sense.

One of the central things about Gandhiji's conception of welfare was the way he saw the interrelation between nutrition, sanitation, water supply, education and health. Too often the expert concerned with any one of these fails to pay attention to the rest. In Champaran, busy as he was with the campaign there he found time to write back to his Ashram friends in Gujarat, advising them to locate the latrines in a new place now that the monsoon had come and the wind was blowing in a different direction. An American visitor to Wardha found Gandhiji cleaning up night soil left lying about by thoughtless villagers nearby. Such was his attention to detail that his difficult days in Noakhali, when the volunteers were moving camp from one place to another, one evening, he remembered that a patient was to be given enema in the village they had just left. Immediately a volunteer was sent back to see to it. The approach which nowadays we call "ecological" was very much Gandhiji's approach, and he saw it in concrete terms—compost heaps, latrines, good water supply, careful animal husbandry and the rest.

Gandhiji firmly believed that no transformation of the rural scene could come about unless the villagers were provided with employment. God could only dare to appear to the poor in the form of work. Even in times of greatest distress no doles were to be given, because when all seemed lost it would be the crowning disaster for a man's self-respect to be taken away. This provides a valuable pointer to those engaged in rural reconstruction work today.

Gandhiji had great belief in the value of manual work. Women in the course of their daily duties, the peasant in the field, the nurse in the hospital all work with their hands, and these are the categories of workers for whom Gandhiji had a special affection. But though he was a lawyer, he did not hold any brief for the professional classes. The masses were much nearer his heart. Once addressing a group of professional people, among whom were doctors and who had lost their profession during communal riots, he surprised his audience by saying that they should be grateful to God for this opportunity to start afresh and to pay back in terms of service all that they as educated people had received from the community. Behind this was Gandhiji's whole notion of trusteeship which was by no means confined to a theory about wealth. All our talents were held in trust and must be used for the good of all. From those to whom much had been given, much would be expected. This would be Gandhiji's answer to anyone who asked why professional workers like doctors and nurses should leave

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