

Mahatma Gandhi's experiments with food

A staunch vegetarian, lapsed vegan, advocate of ethical eating—M.K. Gandhi's dietary preferences were as complicated as his beliefs

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In a letter to a friend in 1911, M.K. Gandhi made an observation that was typical of the moral absolutism associated with him. "I see death in chocolates," he wrote, correlating the appeal of sweets with the development of immoderate passions. Chocolates, he went on to say, inflamed greed, making us vulnerable to gluttony. As historian Nico Slate puts it in his new book, *Gandhi's Search For The Perfect Diet: Eating With The World In Mind*, "For Gandhi, a sweet tooth was the ultimate gateway drug, weakening self-control and paving the way to a life of reckless hedonism."

Yet, like everything else in his life, Gandhi's attitude to food was also complicated, always evolving, and often self-contradictory. His disapproval of chocolate, for instance, was not linked so much to the potential health risks it posed as to his awareness of the exploitation of slave labour on sugar plantations across the world. But even as Gandhi remained militantly opposed to sugar, accusing it of being the harbinger of lust, he also had a lifelong weakness for sweet fruits, especially mangoes. Similarly, though he roused the entire nation to participate in the salt satyagraha in 1930, Gandhi remained a staunch advocate of a salt-free diet, avoiding salt in his food for years.

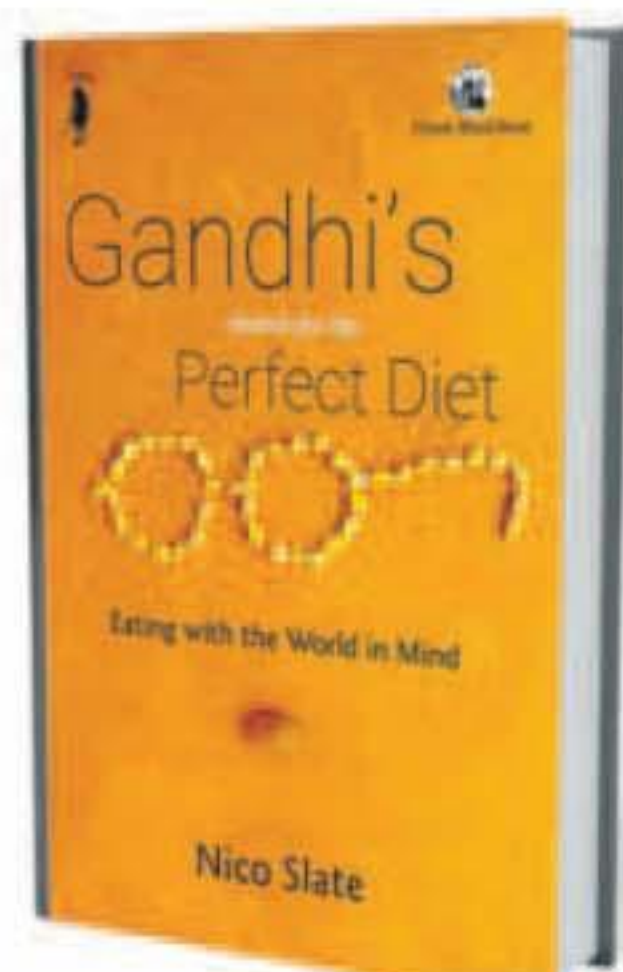
For Gandhi, the question of choosing a diet was inexorably tied to the expression of his political beliefs. His body was the site where this relationship was played out—be it through his rejection of meat and processed foods or the periodic fasts he undertook. As Gandhi realized over the years, his pursuit of the perfect diet would remain elusive—always a work in progress, built on foundations that were periodically shaken by his precarious health or challenged by scientific findings.

The result of scholarly research, Slate's book demystifies Gandhi's dietary politics for the common reader. Structured around the pillars of his diet—"vegetarianism, limiting salt and sweets, rejecting processed food, eating raw food, (and) fasting"—the book also reflects on the prescience with which 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.



M.K. Gandhi in April 1947.

ALAMY



Gandhi's Search For The Perfect Diet—Eating With The World In Mind: By Nico Slate; Orient Blackswan; 240 pages; ₹850.

for independence. Else "we should have to exclude Mussalmans and Christians and a vast number of Hindus as possible co-workers in ahimsa," he told a gathering in 1940, pointedly adding that he knew "many meat-eaters to be far more non-violent than vegetarians".

In contemporary India, when individual dietary choices tend to incite lynch mobs, Gandhi's aversion to violent vegetarianism stands out in stark contrast to the evangelism of the cow protectors. "The only method I know of protecting the cow is that I should approach my Mahomedan brother and urge him for the sake of the country to join me in protecting her," he wrote. "It is not religion, but want of it, to kill a Muslim brother in order to save a cow." Coming from a national icon who loved the cow as one of the noblest creatures on earth, such a sentiment left Hindu revivalists from the Arya Samaj seething, as it would perhaps many today.

Gandhi's position on meat-eating did not form in the abstract. As a young man, he had tried out goat's meat, defying his strictly vegetarian upbringing and, in spite of the remorse that raged within him, he did not stop eating it after his first attempt. Part of the reason for his reluctance to give up meat was perhaps inspired by the colonial propaganda about meat-eaters (i.e. the British) being of hardier constitution than (the largely) vegetarian Indians. Another polarizing narrative based on dietary habits, dating back to Gandhi's time, pitched wheat-eating north Indians as more gallant than rice-eating Bengalis and south Indians.

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. As Slate says, while Gandhi turned fasting into a weapon of resistance, he often "failed to recognize the chasm that separated his experiments" from the hard reality of India. Such was his disconnect from the millions living in abject hunger, as opposed to his voluntary choice of fasting, that he once said: "Taking food is as dirty an act as answering the call of nature. The only difference is that after answering the call of nature we get peace while after eating food we get discomfort."

It would take one of his most strident critics, B.R. Ambedkar, to call out this blinkered view in 1945. As Ambedkar wrote in *What Congress And Gandhi Have Done To The Untouchables*: "It is not enough to say that it is an argument of a cave man. It is really an argument of a mad man." Like his views on sex, Gandhi's case for the best diet was inspired at best, implausible at worst—but not devoid of his flawed genius.

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. As his belief in non-violence as the guiding principle of a morally upright existence grew stronger, Gandhi decided to renounce cow's milk. But persistent illness forced him to concede to drinking goat's milk.

Thus, 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.

In spite of his unshaken adherence to vegetarianism, Gandhi was far from being hostile towards meat-eaters, except perhaps for the members of his family. When a weak and emaciated Kasturba Gandhi was administered, unbeknown to her, a beef broth by a doctor in South Africa while she was recuperating from a surgery, Gandhi was livid. He refused to tolerate such transgressions, although it might have saved her life.

He was willing to give a long rope to meat-eaters otherwise, especially to those who were fighting with him in the quest