



Kasturba Gandhi, a woman behind Mahatma Gandhi

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ABSTRACT

As we remember Mahatma Gandhi, the successful man, we must acknowledge Kasturba - the successful woman behind him. Women like Kasturba are often going unnoticed because of their beautiful humility. She was simple and gentle. And in her gentleness one can see the strength that came through. She fasted when he was in prison, gave up on things she liked like good food, her religious beliefs and even her jewels. Most importantly she did not object to his vow of *brahmacharya*. Though she was a dedicated wife, she was far from submissive. She could hold her own and did make herself heard even if it was Gandhi at the receiving end. Kasturba Gandhi's name is often missed in the face of Gandhi's leadership but she was his pillar of support.

KEY WORDS: Kasturba Gandhi, unnoticed woman, successful woman

INTRODUCTION:

As a wife, Kasturba Gandhi's sacrifice is commendable. She opened her house to the nation and the freedom struggle and supported her husband in his efforts. It would never have been easy on her. Over the years she kept pace with her husband and the different roles he was performing. She supported him in his quest for social, economic and political equality for Indians in India and before that in South Africa.

DISSCUSSION:

Kasturba, was born in Porbandar in 1869, in the same year as Mohandas, son of Karamchand and Putlibai Gandhi. Karamchand was Dewan of Porbandar. The parents decided to unite the two families closer together by marrying their children. In those days early marriage was common all over India and so the engagement of the two children, Kasturba and Mohandas, took place when they were only seven years old. The wedding, however, was celebrated in 1882, when they were both thirteen.

Kastuba and Mohandas early married life was spent in the latter's parental home in Rajkot where Karamchand was placed. In his autobiography, Gandhi writes that he was an envious husband and often without reason suspected his wife. Mohandas tried to play teacher to his young wife. Gandhi admitted that his wife owned more common sense than him and also the ability to judge people. She warned him not to have friendship with Sheikh Mehtab who taught him various bad habits. Mohandas was disturbed by the fear of thieves, ghosts and serpents and did not dare to sit out of the house at night. He was frightened of darkness and slept with a light in the room. Kasturba was much braver than him.

In 1884, Kasturba gave birth to her first child prematurely who sadly did not survive for more than four days. In 1888 Kasturba gave birth to their second child, Harilal. On the advice of Mayji Dave, an old friend of Karamchand, who since the Dewan's death had become a trusted family counselor, it was decided to send Mohandas to England to study law. In July 1891, Mohandas returned from England as a Barrister and was admitted to the Bombay High Court. Kasturba did not go with him to Bombay. As he did not accomplish much success in Bombay, he came backed to Rajkot disturbed. His brothers Lakshmidas and Karsandas, were financially behind Mohandas and his family all through this time. In 1892, Manilal was born. Mohandas took to drafting and writing petitions and memorials in Rajkot.

A business firm, Dada Abdullah & Co. offered Mohandas for one year in South Africa and so he left Rajkot and sailed to Durban in April 1893 leaving behind Kasturba with five year old Harilal and infant Manilal. In eleven years of marriage, they had lived together for hardly four years. He encountered hardships on railway trains and was thrown out of a train at Maritzburg by a white police constable.

His application for admission as an advocate in the Supreme Court in Natal was rejected on the ground that coloured people were not to be placed. In 1896 he returned to India to collect his family from Rajkot. And so Mohandas, Kasturba, Harilal,

Manilal and Mohandas's widowed sister's son, Gokuldas, sailed from Bombay to Durban. He decided Kasturba should wear the dress like Parsi style. The boys wore Parsi coat and trousers.

The whites in Africa were of the opinion that Gandhi was importing a large number of skilled labourers from India which would drive out Europeans from employment. The government of Natal issued orders that the ships should be detained in quarantine and the vessel was detained for twenty three days. When the passengers were finally allowed to disembark, an antagonistic crowd of whites greeted them. Kasturba and the children were sent to the house of Mr. Rustomji, a wealthy Parsi mercantile friend and client of Gandhi. Gandhi left on foot but was badly beaten by the crowd and was saved only by the Police Superintendent's wife Mrs. R.C. Alexander. Kasturba was left alone in a strange country with a family she hardly knew. The Rustamjis being Parsis ate meat. This was all new and strange to her. She must have realized that she had to prepare herself to face great adversity and suffering.

Their domestic life was not free from occasional clash and argument. Gandhi himself admitted that they may have not been an ideal couple or that there may not have been complete identity of ideals between them. It is possible that she did not approve of all he did but they never discussed this. But over time, she came to understand that he stood for certain principles and he would stand by them come what may. In 1898, Kasturba gave birth to their fourth child, Ramdas. In the absence of an Indian nurse, Gandhi helped the doctor. As Kasturba was confined to bed with anemia, he took care of the mother and the new born baby. Two years later, they had their fifth child, Deydas.

In 1901, Gandhi with his wife and children arrived to India. At first Gandhi took a small house in Girgaum, Bombay. In South Africa their neighbours had been white South Africans. Many of Gandhi's co-workers and friends had been Muslims or Christians. At her husband's appeal, she had broken all caste rules of eating, drinking, washing, wearing shoes inside the house and so on. She never spoke of how many these things nuisance her till she came back to India.

They had almost settled down, when Gandhi received a message from the Indian community in South Africa begging him to return immediately. When Kasturba objected, Gandhi said he would go alone and return in a year. But he was troubled about leaving his family alone. After a few months, however, he decided to enroll himself as a barrister in the Transvaal Supreme Court and stay there lastingly and, therefore, sent for his wife and children. Kasturba, with the three younger sons, joined Gandhi in Johannesburg, where he had set up his law practice.

Bubonic plague broke out in their Indian location. There were no hospitals or nursing services for Indians in the city. Gandhi looked after the patients and Kasturba volunteered to help. He suggested that she should visit the homes in the Indian location and talk to the women about basic health and hygiene procedures and explain how to identify plague symptoms. She went to the location with Gandhi and visited the homes of Indians and spoke to the women.

The Transvaal government introduced the Asiatic Law Amendment Ordinance on 22.6.1906 imposing harsh constraints on the entry and living of Indians. Over 3000 Indians assembled in the Empire Theatre in Johannesburg under Gandhiji's leadership and took a promise not to submit to this 'Black Ordinance'. The Black Act was passed requiring all Indians to register. Gandhiji was now constantly on the move. He was rewarded two months' detention for leading a boycott against the Act. Smuts did not withdraw the Black Act and satyagraha was started again. Gandhi was once again arrested and sentenced to two months' imprisonment. In prison, he received news of Kasturba's deteriorating health. After his release when he saw Kasturba, she looked very exhausted and impatient and decided to take her to Dr. Nanji, a Parsi doctor in Durban, who was a personal friend. He advised that an operation be done at once and Kasturba agreed, even though the doctor explained that he could not give any anesthetic because of her weak condition. He did the surgery without anesthesia. Kasturba bore this with excellent bravery.

In 1914, after eight years, the Indian Relief Bill was passed abolishing the poll tax, recognizing non-Christian marriages and relaxing the immigration laws. Gandhi's Satyagraha had been successful and it was time for him to return to India. In July 1914, Gandhi and Kasturba, together with the children and Kallenbach navigated to England. Two days before their arrival in London, the First World War broke out and Gandhi felt that Indians should support the British government. He prepared the Indians in London into a Voluntary Ambulance Corps and both he and Kasturba joined a hospital training course for nurses' aides. Gokhale by this time arrived from France and after a stay of a few weeks in London left for India. Gandhi and Kasturba went after him. Gandhi and Kasturba arrived in Bombay.

They were invited by the Governor of Bombay. After a quick trip to Rajkot and Porbandar, both of them went to Shantiniketan to meet Rabindranath Tagore. After two weeks, they received news of Gokhale's death and so they went for Poona traveling by train. At Kalyan station, where they reached dead tired, Gandhi allowed Kasturba to have a bath in an upper class waiting room. So Gandhi embarked on a yearlong tour of India and Kasturba went with him as far as possible.

Gandhi was on tour all around India and was in and out of prison. Kasturba, therefore, became the administrator of the ashram. She controlled the kitchen and looked after the cooking and feeding of her husband, the inmates of the Ashram as well as the guests who often inwards without prior intimation at sudden hours. As Gandhi's reputation spread, a continuous stream of visitors came to Sabarmati Ashram. For Gandhi, the whole world was his family and Kasturba came to accept this. Mahatma appealed to the women of India to join the struggle for freedom. Kasturba was one of the first to join the battle for freedom. Kasturba had not gone with him initially to Champaran, when she arrived, he placed the entire burden of cooking on her. Once the Rowlatt Bill was passed into law, any Indian could be tried for sedition in secret without a jury and condemned without right to appeal. Gandhi decided to oppose the Rowlatt Bill. With Kasturba, his grandchildren, all his attendants, he returned from Bombay to Sabarmati Ashram and started planning for satyagraha.

The yearly session of the Congress was held in Amritsar with Motilal Nehru presiding and Kasturba went to Punjab. In September 1920 the Non co-operation resolution was put before the Indian National Congress session in Calcutta. Gandhi taught them not to be frightened. He moved from village to village in Gujarat accompanied by Kasturba and Anasuya Sarabhai requesting to women to boycott of foreign cloth and liquor, take to spinning on the charkha and wear khadi. Kasturba presided over the Gujarat Provincial Conference in 1922. After Chauri Chaura, Gandhi withdrew the movement and went on a five day fast. As soon as Kasturba got the news, she hurried to Bardoli with Anasuyaben Sarabhai and Mrs. Sanam. She was with Gandhiji looking after him. On 10 March he was arrested. Gandhiji was sentenced to six years captivity. Kasturba sat in the court through the trial and went with him as he was taken to jail. He was stuck in Sabarmati jail for about ten days and then suddenly released in the middle of the night without any prior intimation. Kasturba was naturally in a state of horror but she bore all this bravely. She issued an appeal to her countrymen and women, published in Young India on 23.3.1922, urging them to carry out the productive programme, particularly spinning.

In January 1924, Gandhiji was transported from Yervada jail to Sassoon Hospital in Poona and operated for appendicitis. Because of her duties in the Ashram, she sent Devdas to look after him. He had passed nearly two years in jail while Kasturba was looking after the Sabarmati Ashram. She along with Anasuyaben went to Poona and was allowed to remain with him to nurse him. After his release, he determined on restoring communal harmony as a series of communal riots had broken out. Gandhi proclaimed his decision to go on fast of twenty one days and once again Kasturba with their son Ramdas, Shankerlal Banker and Anasuyaben went to Delhi and she remained with him till the end of the fast seeing him day and night. Kasturba played an active role in the Borsad satyagraha of 1923-24 and the Bardoli satyagraha of 1928.

In 1930, Gandhiji announced that he would break the salt law and march from his Ashram in Sabarmati to Dandi, a small village on the sea coast about 241 miles away and make salt there, thus challenging the government monopoly of salt manufacture. Initially, Gandhi had included no women in the Dandi March. Women protested and said that no marches, no imprisonments, no demonstrations should take place without them. Seeing the determination and passion of women, Gandhi had to surrender. As Gandhi marched through the towns and villages of Gujarat, women assembled in thousands to cheer him and greet him with garlands. Sushila Nayar went to Sabarmati Ashram at this time and found that Kasturba was going from town to town and village to village on foot or by bullock cart visiting workers and advising women to picket liquor shops, spin and wear khadi. She looked like a soldier of satyagraha engaged in a severe fight. She did not understand politics but her faith in her husband and the cause he was fighting for was understood. During the Salt Satyagraha her husband and three sons were in jail. Gandhi was not arrested at Dandi. Kasturba participated in the freedom struggle along with her husband until her death in 22 February, 1944.

CONCLUSION:

Kasturba's life was indeed one of sacrifice. Kasturba was a woman of courage and in her early years resisted the command of her husband. As Gandhi said, "She was a woman always of strong will which in early days, I used to mistake for obstinacy. But that strong will enabled her to become unwittingly my teacher in the practice of non-violent non-cooperation." Gandhi wrote, "It seems to me that the root cause which attracted the public to Kasturba was her ability to lose herself in me. Gandhi wrote that Kasturba was not behind him in any essential respect. "If anything she stood above me..." Sarojini Naidu described her as "the living symbol of Indian womanhood..."

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