



Kasturba- an epitome of an Indian Wife

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It is M.K.Gandhi who evolved from a lawyer to a statesman and a Mahatma, whose journey of life is studied in detail and who has become the chief subject of many statues and museums; and yet the woman who accompanied him all through his life seems lost in the face of Gandhi's leadership. People who had the fortune of staying with this woman hold her as no less than Gandhi. Memoirs written down by such people portray her as an apt companion of a stalwart like Gandhi. Women like Dr. Sushila Nayar (Pareekh V, Nayar S, 1945), Aparna Basu, Sarojini Naidu (Basu A, 2011) and others hold her in great esteem and write about her simplicity, generosity, affection, kindness and other motherly qualities. And that is not all, her tenacity in facing the unreasonable Gandhi during his younger days and her strength during fasts, jail terms and illnesses, have also been outlined by none other than her husband himself besides others.

Gandhi knew that if could convince his wife to give up her notions about caste and untouchability, he could convince others too for the same. He wanted to lead by example and if his wife denied his principles, whom else could he convince! He was right because once she was able to overcome her apprehensions, she served as a tool to show others what a classless society is. She started loving Harijans as her own and Gandhi's ashram started treating everybody alike. (Nayar S, 1945, pp.73-75) Arun Gandhi, the grandson of Kasturba and Mahatma Gandhi, writes in his book, *Kasturba: A Life*, "The story of my grandmother's life is simply this: while Mohandas experimented with truth, Kasturba experienced it." He further says, "Kasturba Gandhi spent virtually her entire life with the daily all encompassing reality of Mahatma Gandhi's search for Truth." (Raghuvanshi S, 2010)

She was perhaps the only one who could disagree with Gandhi if she did not like something, and point out to him his mistakes. It was not a simple task to opine before the iron-willed Mahatma and disagree with his ways. Because of her support women in the Sewagram ashram could cook gourd as per their choice and not simply boil and eat it; she was the one who distributed extra fruits in the pantry to inmates during lunch; and it was she who asked Gandhi to let Sushila write to her mother while in the Agakhan Palace detention. (Nayar S, 1960) At many such occasions she was the one who drove home her point and her husband then let her do as per her choice. (Giriraj Kishore, 2016, p.238)

Born to a leading merchant of Porbander, she was thirteen when she was married off to the thirteen year old boy Mohandas. Even as a young girl Kastur would not bend to her husband's unreasonable demands. Gandhi himself recollects that though he had no reason to suspect her fidelity he would keep guard. She was a virtual prisoner. He wanted Kastur



to seek his permission if she wanted to go anywhere. He then writes, “..... And Kasturbai was not the girl to brook any such thing. She made it a point to go out whenever and wherever she liked. More restraint on my part resulted in more liberty being taken by her and in my getting more and more cross.”(Gandhi M.K, 1968, p.31) But we find no instances or recollections of Gandhi where her lack of duty is seen. Perhaps a young girl had the smartness of knowing what was right and what was wrong.

Though unlettered she had the wit and ability to manage her household too. For many years and months she had to live away from Mohandas with her children while he was away to England and later to South Africa. Later she and their children too moved to Africa for sometime. Here Kastur picked up the art of conversing in English. Living there in Africa itself, Kasturba had started participating in movements and suffering jail sentences. (Reddy E.S) Struggle had also started in the personal life of Kastur. Here itself, Gandhi had started his experiment of living with people of all races in his house and living and cooking together. (Singh P,2014) He used to serve people during illness and war and used to be away from home for long intervals. And later he took up the vow of Brahmcharya where he ceased all physical relations with his wife. Kastur never stood against Gandhi in such matters. He had her approval all through his experiments. (Gandhi M.K, 1968) It is notable that Kastur had to give up her material possessions as well as her social notions living with Gandhi.

She sacrificed even with regard to family. Many a times her sons too went to jail for participating in Satyagraha movements against the British. It was only with regard to Harilal, their eldest son, that Ba could not find peace, nor could she cement the differences between Gandhiji and him. He was very dissatisfied with Gandhi. He had left them and had turned into a drunkard, though he sometimes visited Kasturba. (Nayar S, 1945, pp.91-103)

Like a wife she was always heeding to his needs. Though there were many who considered serving Gandhiji as their good fortune, she would personally monitor everything. She had accustomed herself to all the views that Gandhi put forward and she would regard her husband a sadhu burning for the cause of his countrymen. In fact, she bore the yoke of freedom struggle for India at par with her husband. She went to jail several times, never begged for comfort in jail and ate once a day if Gandhi was on fast. At many a times she herself participated in Satyagraha movements out of her own will like at Rajkot. (Prabhakar V, 2020, pp36-37) At Champaran, Kastur and Avantibai visited the house of all villagers and came to know about their poverty. Their help was very important for the Satyagraha movement there. (Manick B, 2011, pp15-20; Joshi B, Ojha R.C, 2013, pp29-31) At similar lines was her conviction to spin Khadi. She spun steadfastly and it was a part of her routine to win 400-500 threads a day. (Pareekh V, Nayar S, 1945, p.149) She became the face of Khadi and a champion for empowering indigenous workers into producing for their own. (Sanjana Ray, 2020)

Since Gandhi was at the forefront of the Indian political scenario, it was he who was noticed and whose speeches were covered by the media. Kastur took pleasure in being the wife of Gandhi. She had no lust for limelight and in the meetings she sat with the several



other women.(Jagatram D,1941, p.3-4)Even stalwarts need supporters and in Kastur Gandhi could find the assurance that – I am with you,no matter what. We find that Kastur adopted all that Gandhi stood for. (Joshi B, Ojha R.C, 2013, pp63-64) Gandhi himself writes that “... as my public life expanded, my wife bloomed forth and deliberately lost herself in my work.”(Nayar S, 1960, p.2) In his biography on Gandhi B.R.Nanda writes that Gandhi schooled himself to self discipline.(B.R.Nanda, 1958, p 9) We must remember that Kasturba also had disciplined herself in the same way and that too not to satisfy her intellect but only to follow her husband. She appropriately and rightly realised the significance of what Gandhi was doing and stood shoulder to shoulder with him. She went to jail for the causes that Gandhi stood for and she herself participated in the public campaigns of Gandhi. (Jaydev Jana, 2021)

In the lifestory of Gandhi and Kastur, one can see growth in the character of the heroine too. She became Kasturba from Kastur – an affectionate lady for all the ashram residents, a motherly figure for many and a lady who gave up her social notions on the rigidity of the castes and races. She served many jail sentences, sacrificed comforts of food and clothes and family and set out on the task of winning a struggle against the English walking hand in hand with her husband. Such unwavering faith in the capacity of her husband was her greatness. She realized her salvation in her wifely duties, in synchronization of thoughts with those of her husband and in dying with her head in his lap. Her devotion towards her husband and his ideologies was so much, that it can be said that Gandhi would have been incomplete without Kasturba and her devotion.

History has not accorded the right place to Kasturba. Though she cannot be at par with Gandhi, it must be borne in mind that she was the first women satyagrahi to go to jail in South Africa against arbitrary laws of the government. She must be remembered for her work at Champaran and other Satyagraha movements. We cannot forget that she addressed meetings appealing to Hindu women to give up their prejudices against Harijans (Basu A, 2011, p.34). And her speech before being arrested in the Quit India Movement was the highlight of her career – “Mahatmaji has told you many things already. Yesterday for two and a half hour he had poured out his heart to you at the AICC meeting. What more can be said? Now one has to carry out those information into action.The Sisters must now show their charisma. Sisters of all caste must come together to win this battle. Do not leave the path of Truth and Non violence.”(Pareekh V, Nayar S, 1945, p.163)

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