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## **KASTURBA: THE UNHEARD VOICE BEHIND GANDHI**

### **Abstract:**

This paper is an attempt to analyze critically the role of Kasturba in making Gandhi 'the Mahatma'. This paper is based on the critical study of Neelima Dalmiya Adhar's recently published 'The Secret Diary of Kasturba'. Though Kasturba was only 13 years old when she traditionally entered Gandhi's life as his wedded wife, she gradually became the hidden pillar who always was by the side of Gandhi, irrespective of her own beliefs. This paper tries to vocalize the voice of Kasturba which needed to be heard by Gandhi and the world.

There is a well-known saying that there is always a woman behind every successful man in this world. Mahatma Gandhi, the father of India, prophet of truth and non-violence and saint today might not have been the same without the support of Kasturba, his wife. The world knows almost everything about Gandhi's ideology and actions. But very little attention is paid towards his wife and family. Neelima Dalmiya Adhar has tried to imagine the situation of Kasturba in her fictional autobiography 'The Secret Diary of Kasturba'.

When Kasturba died of pneumonia on 22nd February, 1944, Gandhi lamented and paid tributes to her and cried,

"I can't imagine a life without her! Hail Ba! The ever faithful, loving wife, the symbol of purity, fidelity and devotion, a living tribute to womanhood; she has redeemed her debt to humanity. She shall be transported straight to heaven."<sup>1</sup>

From these words of Gandhi, one must not think that Kasturba and Gandhiji were ideal couple! It was not that from the first day of their marriage, Mohandas and Kasturba had this type of understating. It was only Kasturba who had to sacrifice a lot for becoming a faithful and loving wife. In the beginning, their relationship was troubled and Gandhi was a traditional husband.

Kasturba, who was six months elder to Gandhi, was the third girl to be engaged to Gandhi as the previous two who were betrothed to Gandhi died in infancy. Their engagement lasted for seven years during which period Kasturba Kapadia was trained by her mother in the Hindu rituals of true Hindu Womanhood which she never forgot until she died.

"Meanwhile my mother had begun teaching me the basics of Hindu rituals for she believed that every girl should understand them thoroughly before she transitions into womanhood, in her husband's home."<sup>2</sup>

Kastur Kapadia was given, thus, the training and was prepared mentally for the future journey with her husband as a devoted and faithful wife. After the wedding rituals were over and when Kasturba entered her husband's home for the first time, she gave expression to her feelings in the following manner,

"Suddenly I felt I had morphed into a new creature. Just as a snake casts off its scaly skin to assume a shining new form, I had cast off my innocence and childhood of thirteen years to submerge into a new identity; a role that was fraught with innumerable expectations and responsibilities, within a large joint family. I had become a Gandhi."<sup>3</sup>

As both of them were teenagers full of carnal desires, they enjoyed each-others company. Mohandas, being a traditional Hindu husband, treated Kastur as a toy who satisfied all his demands:

"As for Mohandas, he had acquired a toy, a living organism that could talk back, laugh, play, copulate and then return to being his bonded slave. For him I was a mere plaything that was not permitted to either think or protest."<sup>4</sup>

As a result of this, Kasturba got pregnant with their first child. Gradually Mohandas started behaving like an authoritative, typical Indian husband. He behaved with Kasturba as if she were a bonded slave! She could not move anywhere without his permission. Moreover, she was compelled to learn long and cruel lessons from Mohandas as he wanted her to become a literate, sophisticated woman who is worthy of the Gandhi surname.

Kasturba could not tolerate this fictional behaviour of Mohandas and she revolted against it and asserted herself. As a result, Mohandas stopped teaching her against her will. Thus it seems from this incident that Kasturba was a woman of free will and equally stubborn like Mohandas. Initially, she succumbed to Mohandas out of love and respect as she was taught the same by her mother while she was pregnant. Her mother was her ideal as far as wifely duties were concerned.

When Kasturba went to Porbandar for a few days to live with her mother, during her first pregnancy, Mohandas became friend with Mehtab Sheikh, in whose company Mohandas learnt to smoke, and also tasted meat which was prohibited in a Hindu Modh Vanik family. He started ill-treating Kasturba even though she was bearing his child. It was during this period only that Karamchand, Mohandas' father fell seriously ill and Mohandas had to pass all his time in taking care of his father. He didn't get any time for Kasturba nor for his mentor Sheikh. One example of Mohandas' cruel behaviour to Kasturba is that he never asked her about the changes taking place in her body during pregnancy. On the contrary, he satisfied his erotic need while his father was dying in the adjacent room. This is vividly imagined by the author when she describes,

"I lay there in shock shivering, rubbing my eyes trying to adjust to the darkness. I wanted to push him off, to scream at him, tell him to rush to his dying father's side, but there was a renewed urgency in his movements I shuddered. The wriggling foetus inside me made one last violent convulsion before it lay still. A terrifying, dark silence enveloped me. The painful moans from outside had stopped."<sup>5</sup>

Thus, as a husband, Mohandas never cared for Kasturba's desires. It was after this incident that his father died and Kasturba gave birth to a premature child who died within few days. It was the shock of these two deaths which made Mohandas feel guilty. He spent more time with his friend Mehtab with whom he even didn't hesitate in sharing his personal moments with Kasturba. It was Mehtab only who misguided Gandhi because of which Mohandas accused Kasturba of being unfaithful to him and started beating her.

"You have been unfaithful to me, Kastur, Mohandas lashed out in the cover of a cold dark night soon after, as he struck hard at my arm. The red bangles on my wrist shattered into tiny bits. A small fragment of glass pierced the skin of my palm and drops of blood trickled on the bed. I cringed back with fear."<sup>6</sup>

Thus, Mohandas proved to be a sexually driven, self-righteous and overbearing husband against whom Kasturba never reacted. Even when she comes to know that Mohandas went to a brothel to fulfill his libidinal desires, but felt nervous and came back to Kasturba, she accepted him as a true faithful husband without altering anything which led her husband feel a deep sense of guilt and when begged for forgiveness, she forgives him wholeheartedly:

"My future loomed before me. Mohandas was repentant. He was vulnerable and damaged. He needed me for support and I knew somewhere deep down that this was the role destiny had ordained for me. Mine would be a life of waiting and sacrifice."<sup>7</sup>

Kasturba's role in Mohandas' life becomes clear on that day. She stood by his side in all decisions that Mohandas took then onwards without reacting even once. As a wife, she felt hurt many times, but never reacted or spoke about it even to her sons.

Mohandas left Kasturba for his higher studies and went to England. Kasturba was only 19 years of age and a mother of a ten month boy, Harilal. For almost three years, Kastruba took care of her child as well as Mohandas' family members without communicating with her husband. During those days of 1880's and 90's, the only means of communication was post. And since Kasturba was illiterate, she was depended on her brother-in-law to know anything about Mohandas who used to writw letters to his brothers. During those three years, Kastur felt the pangs of separation from her husband, faced difficulties in bringing her child singlehandedly without sharing her emotions to her husband! She was worried about her son Harilal who was growing without seeing the face of his father even once. She had many doubts about Harilal's acceptance of his father when he returns after three years.

Kasturba proved to be a great moral support for Mohandas when he returned to India and when he was struggling to start his legal practice. She helped him in coming out of the feeling of sense of guilt of not being helpful to her and to his brothers and said,

"Don't despair my beloved. Speak out your mind to your brothers. Ask them for guidance. They will surely help you find a way."<sup>8</sup>

Kasturba stood by Gandhi like a strong pillar during his struggling period and it was only because of her support that Mohandas could decide to go to Durban in 1893. Even though she had the responsibility of two sons to bring up, she allowed her husband to go and said,

"Go Mohandas... Go! My heart tells me that success awaits you across the seven seas. Go, my beloved! Your Kastur shall be counting the hours till you return."<sup>9</sup>

Initially, it was planned that Mohandas would go to South Africa only for one year, but the experiences which he had there, urged him to stay back further. He had two choices either to return to India to live happily with his wife and sons or to stay there and support the fellow Indians. He should have asked Kasturba before deciding anything as she was his better half, waiting for his return and was dreaming of living a happy life with her sons and husband. But Mohandas decided to stay there, without asking her, wrote a letter to his brother in which he stated,

"The Indian community here needs me to fight for their rights. I have to stay back for a while to help them battle the discriminating laws that are impinging on their dignity."<sup>10</sup>

In performing his duties to his fellow Indians in South America, he forgot his responsibilities as a husband and a father of two sons, Harilal and Manilal. And this negligence of his duties towards his family continued until his death.

It is a well known fact that Mohandas' relations with his sons have never been normal, especially with his elder son. Kasturba always played a role of bridge between them. She always tried to portray Mohandas as a loving father to his sons. She was always worried about

the emotional gap between Harilal and Mohandas. Many times she feared that it would result into a catastrophe. She always tried to find ways in which she could connect her sons to their father. But being a stubborn father, Mohandas could not mend his relationship with his sons. He wanted his sons to follow all those ideals which he believed. In doing so, he always forgot that he himself, at his sons' age, was an imperfect boy and did everything including smoking and thieving which his sons never did! And this idealistic approach of Gandhiji created a huge vacuum between himself and his sons. Kasturba had love and respect for his husband and wanted to obey him, but simultaneously she was also a loving and caring mother to her sons which always put her in a dilemma.

She always remained divided among them. She tried to keep balance but could not succeed. This gape went on increasing, especially in Harilal's case, and he started hating his father to such an extent that he even changed his religion only to hurt and revenge spite Gandhi. When the time came for Kasturba to choose either her husband or her son, she sacrificed her love for Harilal and stood by Gandhiji. When she came to know that Harilal had converted himself to a Muslim, she could not tolerate her husband's insult and dictated a public letter addressing Harilal, where she openly declared that she supported her husband. She said,

"My dear son Harilal,

You are born as a son to me but are behaving worse than an enemy... Hari, he (your father) has nothing in his heart for you but abounding love. He has always been keen to keep you close to him; to feed you, clothe you and even nurse you, but you have never heeded his advice or pleas. He has the burden of many responsibilities of the world that he can not do anything more for you. All he can do is lament his misfortune and suffer the disgrace in silence."<sup>11</sup>

Gandhi could perform his duties to his nation only when Kasturba performed her duties to his family. There are many examples mentioned in Neelam Dalmiya's books where Kasturba's existence in Gandhi's life has been totally neglected. The best evidence is Gandhi's vow of celibacy. It was Gandhi himself who was full of libidinal desires in early married life and because of which he could not bid farewell to his father for his eternal journey which led him feel a sense of guilt. Gandhi never asked Kasturba about her desires nor even when he took the vow of celibacy. It was suddenly informed by Gandhi that he has taken vow of

*Brahmacharya*. Even at that time Kasturba, who was the only person to be directly affected by his vow, accepted the command and was not shocked or surprised because she was used to Gandhi's such eccentricities. She felt deeply inside which she never declared:

"It was your decision to ravage my body at will; now it is your decision to ravage my mind. So be it Mohandas, so be it. Brother and Sister we shall be!"<sup>12</sup>

She also feared whether this vow was solely applied to her and not to any other women, but she consoled herself by saying:

"He's an extraordinary man, my husband. And it is my Dharma to follow him, whichever direction his conscience dictates."<sup>13</sup>

Though Kasturba felt it her duty to support her husband in any of his decisions, a big question is raised whether Gandhiji understood his own Dharma towards his wife? After taking the vow of celibacy, it was Gandhi's duty to strictly follow it in his own life both mentally and physically. It is a well-known fact that Gandhiji was spiritually attracted towards Sarala Devi Choudhurani whom he had started considering his 'Spiritual Wife' publically. Kasturba, though she knew that Gandhiji had tender feelings for her, never reacted or spoke anything to him. Their relationship met its natural end, but Gandhiji never felt guilt nor did he express anything to Kasturba:

"...that this relationship full of sensuality was asexual, and my husband's romance with Sarala Devi was entirely platonic, a large component of their eroticism was openly flaunted by them and the demarcation between sexual, sensuous, erotic and platonic had been erased...

Wasn't this a violation of that vow of celibacy? Or was I the only victim of that pathetic vow? I wondered?"<sup>14</sup>

Even though Kasturba was always neglected by Gandhi in his personal life, she always stood by Gandhi's side in need. She proved herself to be a true wife of Gandhi throughout her life. During Gandhi's struggle in Johannesburg, Kasturba supported Gandhi at every stage. When

he decided to fight for Indians in South Africa and started writing articles in 'Indian Opinion', many times he had to remain outside among Indians. People suffered from Black plague and Gandhi was worried for their health. Kasturba, along with Manilal started taking care of people following her husband:

"Perhaps for the first time in all these years, Mohandas saw a woman in me that he had failed to recognize before. He could no longer overlook the unique ability I possessed to work with and inspire other women on my own."<sup>15</sup>

This continued throughout her life and she went on supporting Gandhi in his service to nation.

Even after their return to India, Kasturba helped Gandhi in running Sabarmati Ashram. Whenever Gandhi was arrested and sent to jail, it was Kasturba who saw to it that all rules framed by Gandhi were followed properly. She could understand reasons behind Gandhiji's rules and that was the reason that she could come out of her conservative ideas. The best example is narrated in the incident of a little girl Laxmi who was the daughter of a Harijan couple, whom Kasturba didn't like when Gandhiji allowed her to enter into their kitchen, but later on Kasturba was able to see the innocence in her and thinks,

"She is also God's child! A sweet messenger of God's truth: I felt a cloud lift from my mind and I rushed out to the courtyard, scooped up the squealing child into my arms and hugged her tight till her breath nearly stopped. All barriers broken, all prejudices gone. I took her into my bosom with the same fervor that I would have felt for Rami or any other grandchild."<sup>16</sup>

Thus, throughout her life, Kasturba has sacrificed a lot being the wife of the father of our nation. She had to tolerate the secret, hidden torturing of Gandhiji in the initial years of their marriage, but she gradually adjusted herself in the life of Gandhi without uttering a single word of reproach and during the later years of their married life, she proved herself to be a true moral support for Gandhi who always stood by him in both personal and political lives. She is the mother of our nation not because she is Gandhiji's wife, but she proved herself as an ideal for all Indians by standing both the personal and the political world and maintains a balance

between the two while sacrificing everything at the alter of Mother India. A woman of her stature surely deserves to be an ideal model to be imitated by Indian women.

### References:

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