

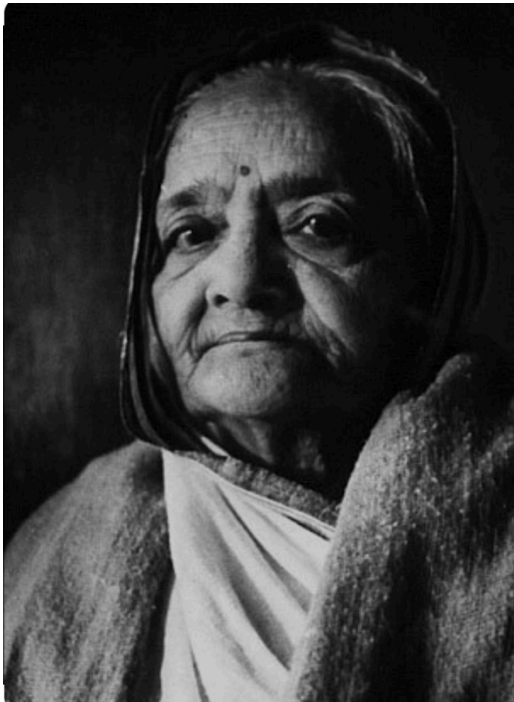
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Kasturba's Commitment

– by Prof. B.M. Bhalla



“Ba, as she was known, was an extraordinary woman, forgiving, courageous and incredibly loyal. As Gandhi's most devoted disciple, she was also his severest and most influential critic. The marriage was not of their own choosing, yet it

developed into a true love match, largely through Ba's willingness to share every aspect of the spartan lifestyle her husband imposed on himself and his closest followers."¹ **Lord Richard Attenborough**

Thinking of Kasturba, the one most poignant and unforgettable scene that flashes across one's mind is Gandhiji keeping wake over the dead body of his beloved wife at Aga Khan Palace in Pune, where he was imprisoned during 1940s for leading Quit India Movement, the last struggle against the Raj, and where she died on 22nd February, 1944. That is an immortal photograph, the greatest man of the age sitting in grief mouse-like at his dead wife's feet, ruminating at the epic association of more than six decades, spanning moral and spiritual voyages undertaken together by them with rare determination and courage. Gandhi was a man of God. He could perhaps look upon grief and joy with equal detachment and equanimity. But thinking of Ba and her life one feels she was not less able to do so.

Kastuba's life and times were very different from ours. Young people of today will have to imagine what their great grandmothers were like if they want to understand Kasturba's situation and life. Kasturba had never gone to school, so she had no formal education. Though Kasturba was unlettered, she was by no means, uneducated. Our rich oral tradition was continued from generation to generation and society remained watchful in this regard. Good upbringing of girls meant training them for a disciplined life attuned to living in an extended joint family. They were taught to be patient, gentle and docile. They were also taught to be generous, sacrificing and courageous. The women were steeped in Indian culture. That was thought to be their main asset as individuals. Their great role-model and ideal was Sita, the wife of Rama. Kastur was also inspired by the great heroine of the 1857 revolt, the brave Rani of Jhansi, Laxmibai. Society at that time was totally male-oriented. It was firmly believed then that a woman's

place was at home. The husband was the lord and master and the wife was expected to obey him without murmur.

In dealing with the life of Kasturba, there are two major difficulties. One, that she herself has left no record of her thoughts, feelings, struggles, associations and other experiences. She never thought of it. It was not part of her mental culture. Besides, she could not write herself. Those who were associated with her in her own family or in public life have hardly left any reminiscences in any form, at least not substantially, nor did any organization or foundation dealing with her or Gandhiji's life and work take the trouble to gather material during the last 60 years from those who knew her well. Unfortunately, now that generation is no more and a valuable resource has been lost forever. Two, the story of Kasturba is so intimately connected with her husband's life and mission that it is hardly possible to write about her without dealing with the story of Gandhiji. Actually, we have to construct her story from what Gandhi tells us about her. The fear is that when we think of Kasturba, there is the danger of her getting obscured by the shadow of the tall tower. But as the facts get sorted out and her forceful personality copes with different challenges at different stages of her life, her individual greatness comes to light. Actually, Kasturba's contact with the outer world was always through her husband. She basically wanted to be an ideal wife and mother and mistress of her own home. Adjusting to far-reaching changes in her life gave her new maturity. and a chance to display her innate qualities such as intelligence, integrity and courage. So the inner and outer struggles of Gandhiji exposed her to new situations and challenges. Ultimately the struggle of the husband became the struggle of the wife and finally the struggle of both.

Kasturba's story has to be read in terms of the struggle of Indian women for identity, equality and an opportunity for self-expression, in an authentic Indian way. Gandhiji opened a door for them, particularly for poor, uneducated women in

all parts of India, encouraging them to participate in the struggle for Indian independence and social reform through the example of Kasturba. It is also an exploration of the kind of identity, integrity and personality Kasturba achieved as wife, mother and ultimately as a public woman. It is instructive to find out Gandhi's justification in treating Kasturba as he did at different stages and why Kasturba acquiesced in accepting that position. Finally, what is the relevance of Kasturba's story for women today?

The journey of the Gandhi couple started in May, 1882 when they were married. Both at that time were 13 years old. It was an arranged marriage within their caste. The families were neighbors, well-known to each other and with the same religious and cultural background. Kastur's father was a rich trader and one time Mayor of Porbandar and Mohandas father was the Dewan (Prime Minister) of the State of Porbandar, and later of Rajkot.

The first phase of Kastur's life can be called a time of self-discovery. Mohandas at that time was still a student and at a very impressionable stage. He was shy, unsure of himself, and afraid of darkness. He was self-willed, peremptory but extremely loving. Kasturba had absolutely no idea at that time how eventful and adventurous her life was going to be. Gandhi's moral and immoral experiments at that time had started under the baneful influence of his Muslim friend. But even before that Kasturba became the target of one such experiment. The young husband wanted to act as a teacher to educate his wife. Gandhi became one of the great teachers of mankind in human history but his first experiment failed. He was impatient and Kastur was indifferent. She saw no point in acquiring the trappings of literacy. She was defiant to the surprise of Mohandas and independent-minded. She was destined to be self-educated. According to Erik H. Erikson, "Mohandas' child bride accepted his sexual demands, whatever their quality, intensity, or frequency really was, because that was a Hindu girl's lot. But

in trying to absorb into his adolescent black magic, he met his first (and many feel, lasting) master: her simplicity and dignity were not to be impaired. She was, he admitted, initially superior to him in physical courage and she remained unafraid, unyielding to his frantic efforts to make a more worthwhile human being out of her by teaching her to read and write. She would become the all admired Ba, but never literate; and she could as always, as Pyarelal puts it,

"Make him feel absurd by just one simple, devastating home- truth for which she had a genius. But she managed gradually to assent to a life of sacrifice which she could not escape."²

Gandhiji in his autobiography. My Experiments with Truth tells us that at this stage he was guilty of "reckless self-indulgence", but in this Kasturba had never played the "temptress". Kasturba's love, patience, truthfulness and commitment naturally helped her husband to rediscover himself and retrace his steps from immoral indiscretions. Kasturba's commitment and sense of self-sacrifice again became visible when she willingly agreed "without complaint" to the mortgaging of her jewelry when the family found that money was short for sending Mohandas to England to study law in London.

By this time Kastur had already given birth to two sons, though the first-born died prematurely. The lonely existence of Kastur during Gandhi's stay in London for three years was made more agonizing because there was no direct communication between the two during this long absence. Besides, she was deprived of the loving care and guidance of her mother-in-law Putlibai because of her death during Mohandas absence. Gandhi successfully completed his studies in London and returned to India in July 1891, but this was not the end of Kastur's worries, Gandhi could not make his mark as a barrister. Kasturba's first phase of life ended when Gandhi decided to go to South Africa to join Dada Abdullah &

Co. as an Attorney in 1893, leaving Kasturba and her two sons behind once again.

Another two years of loneliness and hardship were to pass before she and her children could join her husband in Durban in 1896. The first phase of Kastur's life was a time of knowing her husband and his family, and of discovering the deep joys and pains of motherhood. Her inner strength was tested many a time and the agony of lonely existence called for forbearance and stoic patience, but she acquitted herself well. Her sense of propriety and social responsibility was strong and so was her commitment to her husband. She might not have asserted but she had her own judgment and her own ways of quiet and patient persuasion, which in later life, stood her in good stead.

She was now embarking on an uncharted voyage of self-discovery in the ever-widening sea of her husband's experiments with truth. When Gandhi returned from South Africa after two years' absence in 1895 Kastur discovered a sea change in his personality. She also discovered that he had come not only to fetch his family from India, but also on a public mission of acquaint Indian leadership with the problems that Indians faced in South Africa and the unique new struggle that they had waged under his leadership. He had himself suffered racial discrimination, physical assaults, insults and irrational hatred. Without any premeditated plan or prompting he jumped into a public campaign of resisting this inhuman discrimination. During his stay in India he was meeting leaders, holding public meetings, writing in newspapers and distributing a pamphlet that he had written about all these problems. In the process he discovered his guru, Gopal Krishan Gokhle, who saw in him great potential of leadership. Gandhi had already formulated a response to racial hatred by declaring that they would meet "hate with love". He had resolved in his mind that he will play the role of a social reformer. He had been thinking long and deep about how to reform Indian society. Now the time had come for him to act.

Kasturba had no idea of all this. She was happy that she will be with her family under her own roof, her own home for the first time in many years. She was a mother and house wife and she only wanted to have the comfort of a secure home matching the position and dignity of her successful Barrister husband.

Gandhi during his stay in England had tried hard to discover what England and the West represented in essence. He had developed a great faith and respect for English rule of the Law. He had great faith in England and expected that the same rule of law would be extended to all nations under the Crown. But in South Africa he saw the ugly face of inhuman racial arrogance and acquisitive exploitation without the least consideration of the untold sufferings of the helpless poor immigrant laborer from India. All this was being accomplished by vulgar violence. He was groping for a real response to this brute inhuman soul-less force.

Kasturba got a taste of this force even before she landed in South Africa. The authorities tried their best to prevent Gandhi's landing but when they could not do so he was assaulted by an angry mob. Kasturba was terribly afraid and nervous. But all Indians in South Africa were united. No religious, regional or class distinctions marred their mutual trust and good relationship. Truth, honesty, affection, sacrifice and collective sharing of responsibility were the hall-marks of this struggle. Gandhi emerged as a natural leader. He declared that he will not charge for any service that he will render in the public cause. His house was an open house and Kasturba was the hostess and manager of this establishment, coping with ever increasing demands of her husband's public engagements. Her own family was increasing. She gave birth to two more sons in 1898 and 1900. She had to look after her children and also of her household which was increasingly becoming a hostel of public-men. Ultimately, her house became an

Ashram with the harsh discipline of a life of poverty. But before that she had to struggle to transform herself in the light of the revolutionary changes that her husband was making in his life and mission.

One day Gandhi insisted that his wife should clean the chamber pot of a Christian Indian of untouchable caste who was staying with them. She complied but unhappily, Gandhi was furious and tried to throw her out of home. After many years Gandhi described the incident in his autobiography as follows:

"I was far from being satisfied by her merely carrying the pot. I would have her do it cheerfully. So I said, raising my voice: "I will not stand this nonsense in my house". The words pierced her like an arrow. She shouted back "keep your house to yourself and let me go." I forgot myself and the spring of compassion tried up in me. I caught her by the hand, dragged the helpless woman to the gate, and proceeded to open it with the intention of pushing her out. The tears were running down her cheek in torrents and she cried. "Have you no sense of shame? Must you so far forget yourself: where am I going? I have no parents or relatives here to harbor me. Being your wife, you think I must put up with your cuffs and kicks? For heaven's sake behave yourself, and shut the gate. Let us not be found making scenes like this".I put on a brave face, but was really ashamed and shut the gate. If my wife could not leave me, neither could I leave her. We have had numerous bickerings, but the end has also been peace between us. The wife, with her matchless power of endurance, has always been the victor."³

Kastuba's anguished response must have redeemed Gandhi spiritually and left an indelible impression on his mind forever.

Kasturba also differed with him about the schooling of their sons. Gandhi did not send his sons to regular school in South Africa because he thought they were "totally inadequate". He wanted to teach them himself. But his public engagements hardly left any time for regular coaching. So the education of his sons was neglected. She thought some schooling was better than no education. But in this matter Gandhi had his own way. No school and literary education for his sons and Gandhi was not apologetic throughout his life about it.

On their leaving South Africa for India in 1901. Gandhi and Kasturba had another tiff. This time it was about the valuable gifts that Gandhi family was showered with by friends and admirers in South Africa for services rendered by him. The whole episode is worth recording for the sake of Kasturba's stand and spirited argument: Gandhi had decided to donate the costly presents for public service. He had somehow won over his sons on his side. But Kasturba asserted:

"I do not agree with you. Gifts given by friends with such affection cannot be rejected."

"But it is immoral to accept gifts for social service",

"I don't see why?"

What do you propose to do with them then?" Mohandas asked.

"I will keep them for our daughters-in-law," Kasturba declared.

"But the boys are still young, they won't marry for a long time yet," Mohandas said in exasperation.

"We don't need these things," the boys chimed in.

"Who asked you?" Kasturba snapped. And to Mohandas she said, "You are trying to make saints out of my boys before they are men".

"But surely we won't choose for our sons' brides who are fond of ornaments," Now Mohandas was being reasonable. And if we do need to provide them with jewels, I will be there. You will ask me then."

"Ask you!" Kasturba's usually melodious voice was strident. "You have already given everything away. Where are you going to get jewels from?"

"But I've already drawn up the trust-deed,"

Mohandas countered.

"Who asked you to? She burst into tears.

"And what right do you have to my necklace? The gifts are as much mine as yours"

"The gifts were given for my services to the people" Mohandas was very patient in making this point.

"I agree, but it's the same thing." Kasturba sobbed." "Services rendered by you are the same as rendered by me. I have toiled for you day and night. Is there no service?" His wife's last argument struck home. Mohandas was taken aback but only for a moment. He remained unyielding, and by his own account "somehow extorted a consent from her." "Before they sailed from Durban, the gifts, including Kasturba's necklace, went into a bank vault to provide trust funds for the Natal Indian Congress." ⁴

Kasturba's claim that she too was making a contribution to the public service merits serious consideration. Gandhi with his family had returned to India in December, 1901. But when in November 1902, the Indian Community urgently called him back to South Africa, he came back in 1903. But Kasturba and the children were left in India. They joined him in early 1904. Gandhi's involvement in

political and public service was increasing every day. Though he had a roaring practice now, much of his earnings were being spent on public causes. So he decided to simplify his own life to spend the least on himself and his family. All servants were dismissed. He insisted that everybody, including the children, must share the household work. The biggest burden, of course, fell on Kasturba who had to manage and supervise everything. She had to cook for the family and all the borders. Gandhi became his own launderer and barber. He was gradually turning his home into an Ashram. He was also practicing sexual self-control and moving towards *Brahmacharya*. He had Kasturba's full cooperation once again. So Kasturba was part and parcel of all these experiments, a full sharer of *tapasya*.

The Gandhis were now living in Johannesburg. He had started publishing a weekly newspaper, Indian Opinion and to disseminate information among the Indians throughout South Africa. He was subsidizing the paper by sinking 75 pounds a month. But the city was suddenly struck by a deadly epidemic plague. The Indians who lived in crowded and unhygienic localities were the worst victims. Gandhi plunged into organizing relief and care. Kasturba by deciding to join him in this relief work stunned Mohandas. First, he said no. But then he asked her to visit homes in the Indian location and spread hygiene and health awareness. This was the beginning of Kasturba's own public service in a mission of mercy.

Kasturba made a great impression on Gandhi. This was his new discovery. According to Gandhi "Kasturba had now become a person he had never known before a perfect helpmate, revealing hidden strengths, providing unexpected support. For the first time Gandhi had seen his wife's unique ability to work with other women, to inspire others by her own actions. And he had realized, not for

the last time, that Kastuba could no more withhold help from those in distress than he himself could. ⁵

That was in early 1904. In October of that year when Mohandas was travelling from Johannesburg to Durban, his friend Henry Polak thrust a book into his hand which changed his life for ever. It was Ruskin's *Unto His Last*. The book cogently presented to him what he had been consistently thinking about himself. Ruskin's criticism of cut-throat competitiveness and limitless materialism of industrial England, and his contention that a balanced economy is one which is based on cooperation among people and nourished the greatest number of people on noble and moral principles touched the deepest chords in Gandhi's heart. He learnt three lessons instantly. One that the good of the individual is contained in the good of all, two, that a lawyer's and a barber's work are of equal worth and three, that the life of labor with one's hands is the life worth living. Gandhi immediately decided to put these ideas into practice.

Gandhi's experience, religious study and meditations led him to become himself by transcending his limitations by his increasing commitment to selfless service. His religious study, particularly of Bhagavad Gita, had provided him with a "grammar of action". So he immediately decided to live a life of poverty by giving away everything for causes affecting the weak and the poor of the world.

The Phoenix Farm Settlement was established in the same year. It was an experiment in community living where people of different nationalities, races, religions and castes shared life on moral principles and acted in public interest in social and political matters. Momentous things were happening in the world outside. The Zulu rebellion took place in 1906 and Gandhi organized and led an Indian Ambulance Corps to help the Government. He shifted his family to the Phoenix Farm. In the same year the Transvaal Government decided to impose severe restrictions on entry and living of Indians. Gandhi sprang into action and

he along with 3000 Indians took a vow not to submit to the "Black Ordinance". This Black Act was passed in 1907. All Indians, men, women and children were required to get themselves registered by a certain date and obtain a certificate of registration. Gandhi decided to fight this "Black Act". It was decided in a meeting of more than 3000 Indians of Transvaal that they would resist this onslaught on their dignity through "passive resistance". Thus the idea of non-violent but militant resistance or "*Satyagraha*" to combat injustice was born. Gandhi was punished with two months imprisonment for leading the movement against registration.

Kasturba herself supported the campaign by vowing to eat the same food that her husband was to get in prison i.e. unsalted, unsweetened, cornmeal mush. She was leading a very hard and isolated life at Phoenix Farm. She was managing not only her own family but also all the affairs of the settlement.

The struggle against the unjust Acts in South Africa continued for 8 years. Not only Mohandas but his three sons Hari, Manilal, Ramdas and Kasturba and other members of his family, participated and suffered imprisonment. Ultimately, in June 1914, Indian Relief Bill was passed which abolished Poll Tax, Non-Christian marriages were recognized and immigration laws were relaxed. At this stage Gandhiji decided to return to India.

During these fateful eight years of South African struggle Gandhi had transformed himself from an ordinary middle-class Barrister to a matchless leader who invented a new technique of militant resistance.

Gandhi also realized during the Zulu War that if he truly wanted to serve humanity he must take the vow of "desirelessness" or "*Brahmacharya*" he clearly saw that if I were to engage in the pleasures of family life and in the propagation and rearing of children. In a word, I could not live both after flesh and the spirit

The prospect of the vow brought a certain kind of exultation, opened out limitless vistas of service-⁶

This realization and resolve was brewing in his soul for some time and finally he decided to take the "*Brahmacharya* vow" in 1906. But this decision not only concerned him but Kasturba also. He tells us in his Autobiography he had discussed this matter with Chaganlal, Maganlal and Albert West before mentioning it to Kasturba. When Gandhi informed Kasturba about his vow, he records that "She had no objection."⁷

Gandhi was taking his wife for granted. Did he think that Kasturba also had attained the same spiritual stature by the same kind of discipline of body and mind as he himself was struggling to achieve? Is it that Kasturba had not only realized that her husband had truly undertaken a great mission in his life, but also that she was part and parcel of that enterprise as a true Indian wife? Kasturba never discussed personal issues with anybody in her life, not perhaps even with her husband. All evidence points to the fact that both husband and wife achieved a new sense of freedom and came more close as comrades and friends. Kasturba remained a devoted wife till the end and never gave the impression that she had been wronged. Yet an educated modern woman would find it not only unacceptable but also absurd and cruel. She would perhaps argue that taking Kasturba for granted on such a crucial issue which concerned her was the violation of her womanly rights and an effort to her dignity. But all such thoughts were foreign to Kasturba's mind. Instead Kasturba would ask whether Sita had asked such questions from Rama when she was treated unjustly or Tara from Harishchander. Sacrifice was part and parcel of her character and came naturally to her.

Erik H. Erikson makes a very discerning comment. According to him:

We have seen how Gandhi learned to pay meticulous attention to his health; and while in his scrupulosity he would sometimes upset his health as well as the good will of others, he learned to house his body and to derive from it a flexible strength and resolute energy. Equally meticulously was his bookkeeping and to the use of available funds. True, he would later accept wealthy patronage with sovereign detachment, and yet he was always scrupulous in his detailed accounting. We are already prepared for the fact that, unable as he was to household equally well what Freud has called a man's "libido economy", he would, for the very sake of emotional economy, within a decade abjure sexual activity altogether. But then, this would come about within the total context of the endeavor to transform his "house" from a home for his family to a hostel for co-workers and followers, and eventually into an agrarian settlement with many characteristics of a religious order.⁸

What Gandhi says while commenting on the Chamber Pot incident in his Autobiography is relevant and helpful in understanding his attitude to the Brahmacharya rows:

"Let no one conclude from this narrative that we were by any means an ideal couple, or that there is a complete identity of ideals between us. Kasturba herself does not perhaps know whether she has any ideals independently of me. It is likely that many of my doings do not have her approval even today. We never discuss them. But she is blessed with one great quality to a very considerable degree, a quality which most Hindu wives possess in some measure. And it is this: willingly or unwillingly, consciously or unconsciously, she has considered herself blessed in following in my footsteps, and has never stood in the way of my endeavor to lead a life of restraint. Though, therefore, there is a wide difference between us intellectually, I have always had the feeling that our life is a life of contentment, happiness and progress."⁹

Gandhi cannot see that Kasturba was quite firmly committed to her wifely ideal, which had the strength of withstanding any pressure. Besides her suffering was nothing as compared to the spiritual satisfaction that she got by feeling that she was performing the role of a good Hindu wife.

Kasturba was a strong and straight person with a high sense of right and wrong. It was another matter that in the beginning what she thought was right was not actually right and about when she developed she realized it. This is particularly the case of her attitudes towards the Harijans. But she corrected herself only when she was convinced. Kasturba differed with her husband about the education of her children. But Gandhi had very early become the Bapu of all. So his own son had no special claim on him. He also wanted his wife to become Ba for all irrespective of their caste, race, sex, nationality, religion etc. This role she assumed in the Ashram, and later on in India as she developed and assumed great public responsibility.

It was in South Africa that Satyagraha was born. Vow-taking which started as a commitment of Gandhi to his mother when he was going to England as a student was developed as a fine art and Kasturba made not a small contribution in seeing to it that vows are kept. It is true that Gandhi took his wife for granted a little too much. But perhaps this was the way of all husbands at that time. But Kasturba was a spirited person and Gandhi knew it well. Gandhi ultimately acknowledges Ba's contribution: In 1947 he said, "It is because of her (Kasturba) that I am today what I am and added. It was that illiterate woman who helped me to observe all my vows with utmost strictness and kept me ever vigilant. Similarly in politics also she displayed great courage--She was a devout Vaishnave (who) regularly observed sacred days but she loved the Harijan girl (in the Ashram) as much as she loved Manu or Devadas's Tara. In the fast of 1943--1 was nearly at

death's door, but she never cried or lost courage, but kept up other people's courage and prayed to God. I can see her face vividly even today" ¹⁰

Some years ago when Nelson Mandela came to India he observed that the Mahatma to South Africa Gandhi was South Africa made. It is a fact that he went as Mr. M.K. Gandhi and came back as Mahatma Gandhi. His heroic struggle against exploitation and injustice by militant non-violence or *satyagraha* was conceived and developed there. This was a very original and historically unprecedented experiment. His own spiritual and moral development during this period was remarkable. Kasturba also joined this struggle by her own sweet will. She supported her husband, actively suffered by undergoing imprisonment and thus achieved equally remarkable development in her personality and mental stature. In this way Kasturba was also made in South Africa.

Gandhi in the process of living and experimenting in his public and private life discovered Kasturba, and she discovered him in his ever expanding universe. In this cooperative discovery and counter-discovery, both developed as deeply committed to common values, thus discovering the true meaning of Indian marriage and its religious and spiritual basis. The nature of this husband-wife partnership can be understood from yet another angle. Gandhi in his socio-political work had identified himself with the enslaved, the poor and the oppressed and the utterly deprived, who lived in constant fear of hunger, victimization and threat of physical violence. In other words, they lived in a state of constant psychological depression. Gandhi decided not only to fight evil and hate with love but also to become a reformer as a healer. Mass healing involves socio-political action at the mass level. Healing involves caring in the most sincere way, which means service of the victims at the individual and social level. Gandhi consciously trained himself as a nurse and naturopathy and missed no opportunity of spreading health awareness and cleanliness. He promptly offered

services to the wounded and the diseased even at the risk of his own health. He would always rush to the spot where people were suffering due to man-made or natural causes. Even in this difficult task Kasturba joined him even when her own health was in bad shape. Gandhi had incorporated in the process of healing the maternal element in his character, thus coming closer to what Kasturba represented as a mother.

Gandhi returned to India in 1915 to a rousing reception in Bombay, and then proceeded to Shantiniketan where Rabindranath had invited him with his Phoenix group for a 15 days stay there. Gokhale had asked Gandhiji not to make any political statement or move for a year. First he should go round the country to see and observe the people and understand the social and political situation. During this year of silence, Kasturba accompanied her husband in these long 3rd class railway journeys. In the meantime, Gandhiji and his 25 companions set up an Ashram at Kochrab near Ahmedabad. But when Gandhiji admitted an untouchable family to the Ashram, the Financial Supporters withdrew the support. Kasturba also avoided the untouchables. Gandhi was firm and unrelenting.

Kasturba ultimately saw the logic of Gandhiji's stand and realizing the pain and injustice embraced Laxmi, the daughter of the Harijans family like her own granddaughter, thus crossing a significant bridge in her moral and spiritual development. Kasturba now started actively participating in the campaigns which Gandhi started. In 1917 when Gandhiji started the Champaran Satyagraha, Kasturba joined him to work with women and children and to see for herself the exploitation of the people and the extent of poverty and deprivation that they suffered.

The Ashram was shifted to near the banks of Sabarmati in 1917 because of an epidemic of plague. Spinning on Charkha was introduced in Sabarmati Ashram and Kasturba became a skilled spinner. 1919 was a fateful year and happenings like Jallianwala Bagh Massacre involved the whole country under the active leadership of Gandhiji. During this period Kasturba not only looked after the management of the Ashram but was also mothering her four grandchildren.

Kasturba was an active participant in the work of Harijans upliftment and the boycott of foreign cloth during early twenties. After the "Great Trial" in 1922 when Gandhiji was awarded 6 years imprisonment, Kasturba's appeal to "My dear countrymen and Country-Women" was published in Young India. During 1930 Salt Satyagraha, Gandhiji and two of her sons were imprisoned. Manilal was beaten and landed in the Jail hospital with a fractured skull. Kasturba saw these dark days with great apprehension, but she was brave and went from place to place urging women to come forward and picket the liquor shops. When Ba went to Lahore to see Devdas in jail, she was taken there in a procession as a leader. After Gandhiji's release Ba accompanied him to Shimla for a meeting with the Viceroy. Ba was specially invited by the Vicerine.

After the failure of the Round Table Conference in London in 1931, the national leaders were arrested again. This time Ba was also arrested and imprisoned in Sabarmati jail for 6 weeks. This was her first imprisonment in India. Gandhi's fast in jail was a very trying time for Ba. The responsibility of looking after him and giving moral spiritual support fell on her shoulders which she discharged very creditably.

Kasturba became Gandhi's great support in his work for untouchables. She represented Gandhiji at the Anti-Untouchability Conference in Madras in 1933 and then went on a tour of the region to plead for the Harijans. During the two

years 1931-32 Ba was arrested six times for participating in Civil Disobedience. The British Government considered Ba as a great threat for her ability to draw women into the freedom struggle. In December 1936, Ba moved to Wardha Ashram with her granddaughter Manu. Here she took the responsibility of Ashram management inspiring fierce devotion among coworkers. She learnt to read newspapers and letters. She also read and memorized the 12th Chapter of the Bhagavad Gita.¹¹

In 1939, Ba got involved in Rajkot Satyagraha. Bapu wrote in the Harijan: "My wife feels so much about the sufferings of the people that though she is as old as I am and much less able than myself to brave such hardships as may be attendant on jail life, she feels she must go to Rajkot".¹²

She was arrested on arrival at Rajkot. After a prolonged struggle of two years and a fast unto death by Gandhiji, an agreement was reached. Ba's health was deteriorating fast and she now accompanied Sushila Nayar for treatment in Delhi.

During 1942, Quit India Movement, when Gandhiji was arrested, Kasturba addressed a huge meeting in Bombay's Shivaji Park and released an inspiring message. She was arrested and taken to Aga Khan Palace where Gandhiji was lodged as a prisoner. Ba's health was now quite delicate. She breathed her last on 22nd February, 1944. Times of India commented, "Mrs. Gandhi ranks among the great women of India known to India's worshiping millions simply as 'Ba'-mother"

Kasturba's participation in India's struggle for freedom and in the constructive programmes started by Gandhiji entails her to an independent status as a freedom fighter and as a leader, particularly of the common Indian woman at that point in Indian history.

Two important issues of Kasturba's life and concerns remain. One, Kasturba's pain and suffering about the conditions of the members of her family, the problems of her sons, daughters in law and grandchildren. She was always concerned and preoccupied with their welfare and gave them as much support as she could at different stages of her life. It seems her differences about the treatment meted out to them by Gandhiji remained unresolved right up to the end of her life.

Two, the pain when some women who came to be associated with Gandhiji tried to usurp her place. She fought for that space and never yielded, and remained a devoted wife and mother till the end. She extended her domain of love, care and service to all and demonstrated by her life and conduct that women have that strength which enables them to overcome all shortcomings and hurdles provided they are committed to values. If Mahatma Gandhi became the Father of the Nation, Kastur by dint of her own merit, really became "A-mother" to us all and as such a symbol of strength particularly to the women of India.

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- About the Author

Born in Dinga district of Gujarat in what is now Pakistan, Prof. B.M. Bhalla has had a long and distinguished teaching career in Delhi University. His works have been published in various national and international journals and his translation of the Punjabi poet Shiv Kumar Batalvi's celebrated verse epic Luna won him the prestigious Delhi State Sahitya Academy Award in 2003.