

REUNION

2ND OCTOBER, 2019

We are gathered here to commemorate the 150th birth anniversary of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi - who is known all over the world as Mahatma Gandhi.

It is however also the 150th birth anniversary of Kasturba Gandhi - Mahatma Gandhi's wife and companion and soul mate.

Gandhiji could not have been the Mahatma if it had not been for Kasturba - and about her he said "I learnt the lesson of non-violence from my wife Kasturba".

Mahatma Gandhi's life - his mind, his actions, everything about him is a subject of discussion. He had a view on everything and wrote extensively. He was never afraid of espousing a view yet if he felt that somewhere he had erred he would admit it and in fact many times he changed his position on issues and topics - always giving a cogent and lucid argument. This was a disarming trait and as a result it was difficult to second guess him. He was a product of his time but he became through his own constant unrelenting inner search a figure that is timeless, a figure that belongs to the whole world and to the whole of humanity.

Yet Gandhiji remains - for me at least - a mystery. He cannot be pigeonholed into an ism. His autobiography 'My Experiments with Truth', which although extremely candid and brutal in its honesty, does not explain his ability to mobilize public opinion, garner support, influence masses as well as individuals. He must have been brilliant and definitely possessed of immense charisma. When did Gandhiji realise his destiny? Was it as a child when he confessed to his father about stealing some money, or was it later as a disenchanted lawyer in Rajkot when he refused to be a part of the political intrigues in the Kathiawar Court? Was it in the U.K. when he steadfastly stuck to the vow he made to his mother - no alcohol, no women, no meat. Or was it on the train at Pietermaritzburg? We don't know and we shall never know.

However, if Gandhi the phenomenon is a mystery, then the woman, Kasturba, who stood shoulder to shoulder with him from the age of 13 till her death is a source of fascination. In June, 1947 Gandhiji commented "it is because of her that today I am what I am". He had earlier, after her death in 1944, said "if I had to choose a companion for myself after life, I would only choose Ba". Mohandas p516RG.

Kastur Makanji Kapadia married Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi in 1882. Both were 13, she a little older. Gandhiji later in life was a strong critic of the practice of child marriage, but at that time both must have gone through the ceremony as a necessary rite of passage. The young Mohan's only thoughts, recorded in his autobiography revolved around the pageantry, the rituals, the food and a 'strange girl to play with'. We don't know what Kastur's thoughts were. But we do know that she had a strong will of her own. The beautiful Kastur "asserted her independence, running without Mohan's permission to friends and relatives, refusing to be taught English and arithmetic by Mohan, and shaming him by her natural courage". Mohandas p8. Kastur 'knew no fear of serpents and ghosts and could go anywhere in the dark'. Mohandas p9.

Kastur was unschooled, yet after her death Gandhiji would write :

" In the current sense of the word, she was uneducated, but to my mind she was a model of education".

Just as I wondered earlier about Mohandas, I also wonder about Kastur - what were her thoughts every time her husband responded to the call of his conscience or when he tried to mould her to his wishes. He was a hard task master and he most certainly denied her the traditional life that she must have envisaged for herself. One thing is apparent, and from not only Gandhiji's autobiography, that their life together was from the start marked by departures and separations. How much she was consulted in these decisions in the first phase of their marriage we do not know. We do not know for instance what she went through when he left

for England in 1888 to become a Barrister, although she sobbed inconsolably. Harilal, their eldest son was born by that time.

The only period in their lives together that was in some ways normal was 1891-92. Gandhiji had come back from England and found work first in Bombay and then Rajkot. "This phase was probably the calmest period in the lives of Ba and Bapu - there was a sense of financial security, a promise of a fulfilling life". Mohandas p57. Their second son Manilal was born in 1892.

However destiny beckoned and Gandhiji set sail for South Africa in 1893.

Again Kastur and her husband were separated and when Mohandas came back to India in 1896, to bring his family back to SA, he must have been a totally different person. He had faced racism, violence, he had been introduced to Tolstoy's writings. His "religious quest was awakened" (Mohandas p74) in this period and he had embarked upon political activism. Their two younger sons Ramdas and Devadas were born in Durban, in 1898 and 1900.

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We do not know how Kasturba dealt with the unfamiliar. The weather, the language, the dress, the food, the customs and usages of a new land. Gandhiji was inexorably following his destiny and she was being dragged along. Gandhiji was a domineering husband (which he acknowledges in his autobiography), yet Kasturba was not afraid of voicing her opinions. How did Kastur, manage with the cosmopolitan, multi religious, diverse group of people, she who had only known a certain tradition and was steeped in that. How did she deal with a husband who was now influenced by writers from across the world and who sought to bring these ideas within their domestic walls.

In South Africa Gandhiji became the Mahatma and Kasturba was transformed into a formidable force. She went as a woman who was part of the Indian joint family tradition, whose only identity was that of a wife and mother. By the time they returned to India in 1915 she had become his companion and comrade. She had become a warrior in her own right. She along with 15 other women were imprisoned for 3 months in 1913, when she had joined in the Satyagraha in the Transvaal against racial laws - at a time when even the Suffragette Movement was in its nascent stage in Europe and women activists were unheard of. Kasturba had faced up to all the challenges that had been thrown at her and emerged as a power in her own right. Her fame had spread wide and in 1915 Sarojini Naidu wrote about Kasturba " by her race, qualities of courage, devotion, and self-sacrifice has so signally justified and fulfilled the high traditions of Indian womanhood".

She was the mirror in which Mahatma Gandhi could see his reflection with all his flaws and defects. Through Kasturba's sacrifice and strength and spirit Gandhiji understood and empathised with issues relating to women. She was the one who inspired Gandhiji to write "woman is the incarnation of ahimsa. Ahimsa means infinite love, which again means infinite capacity for suffering. Who but woman, the mother of man, shows this capacity in the largest measure". (Exploring Gandhi p233) Manmohan Choudhuri.

Ba and Bapu returned to India in January, 1915 - urged by Gopal Krishna Gokhale to lead the Indian freedom struggle - and right from the start they travelled incessantly across the length and breadth of the country. Kasturba went on marches, organised and ran the ashrams that were created -Sabarmati and later Sewagram and mobilised people.

Their last home together was to be the Aga Khan Palace Prison, where they were both imprisoned from August, 1942. By this time she was very frail and unwell. Ba had become the mother figure for everyone - but especially for her husband who was left bereft on her death in February, 1944.

One of the most moving tributes written for Kasturba was by Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, who wrote :

“ I pay my humble tribute to the memory of that great lady who was a mother to the Indian people, and I wish to express my deepest sympathy for Gandhiji in his bereavement. I had the privilege of coming into frequent personal contact with Shrimati Kasturba, and I would sum up my tribute to her in a few words. She was the ideal of Indian womanhood – strong, patient, silent, self-sufficient. Kasturba was a source of inspiration to the millions of India’s daughters among whom she moved and whom she met in the struggle for the freedom of her motherland. From the days of the South African Satyagraha she has shared with her great husband the trials and sufferings which have been their lot for nearly 30 years now. Her many imprisonments seriously impaired her health, but jails held no terrors for her even in her 74th year. Any time Mahatma Gandhi launched a civil disobedience movement, Kasturba was at his side in the forefront of the struggle, an outstanding example to India’s daughters and a challenge to the sons of India not to lag behind their sisters in the fight for India’s independence”.

Mahatma Gandhi’s life was one of constant experimentation and a search for a life that harmonised man’s conscience and his duties. The first person who felt the effects of this search was always Kasturba. Her indomitable will and her own sense of right and wrong saw her through situations with grace and dignity. She provided her children and the larger family a sense of belonging, of rootedness, of tradition. Also I want to mention here that the stories that have come down from the elders and from my mother always reveal a light heartedness that belied any hardships. This is important to know. Gandhiji always had a twinkle in his eyes and when he laughed, and he laughed often, it was with the carefree abandonment of a child. Neither of them ever thought that their lives had been one of sacrifice, but one of fulfilling their duties on this earth, in this human experience.