

WOMEN NATIONALIST - KASTURBA GANDHI

Dr. M. Kanagaraj

*Assistant Professor and Head, P.G. Department of History
Cardamom Planters' Association College, Bodinayakanur*

India is a land of many people whose names and deeds are worthy of being remembered, unfortunately, we forget many a versatile personalities. We know few personalities because of their direct and active participation in the freedom struggle. Many of the books, journals and articles have been referred about them. As the same time, few of the personalities and their invaluable service to our country were not been properly registered. One among such a personality is Kasturba, a freedom fighter, in Indian history. Kasturba participated freedom movement in India and South Africa.

Kasturba was better known as the wife of the Father of our nation, Mahatma Gandhi. Kasturba Gandhi was born on April 11, 1869 in Porbandar and her father's name is Gokuldas Makhanji and Mother's name is Viraja Kumvarba. He was a wealthy business man in Porbandar. Kasturba Gandhi was a symbol of Sacrifice and self-denial and it self-abnegation, sacrifice are the essential virtues of a Mahatma, the Kasturba must be called one.¹ Unlike other women leaders in the contemporary time Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant and Vijayalakshmi Pandit were educated but she was neither educated nor sophisticated. Kasturba was a Petchild and she as illiterate.²

Mahatma Gandhi return back to India from England and South Africa with Kasturba and their children in January 1915.³ Immediately after the arrival, in a short stipulated time Mahatma Gandhi started the Sabarmathi Ashram in Ahmedabad with 25 inmates.⁴ The Ashram covered a area of 150 acres. It functioned as an industry. Mahatma Gandhi, Kasturba and their children lived with the teachers and their family Kasturba Gandhi took charge of the kitchen along with other women folk.

At the time, untouchability crisis emerged in the ashram, some of its inmates including Kasturba Gandhi were unhappy about the arrival of an untouchable family. Though Kasturba had given into her husband's wishes in South Africa, her orthodox prejudices about untouchability reared up and once again in her native improvement. This notion existed in the ashram have been severely disturbed the Mahatma Gandhi. The Ashram had his own motive to that respected to of all persons. From the beginning the Ashram rules and regulations had declared that untouchability was unacceptable. Subsequently Mahatma Gandhi posed a starting choice to Kasturba stating whether she had to give up her untouchability complex otherwise she was forced to quite the ashram.⁵

Kasturba was shocked and also in a dilemma. She knew her husband very well. She knew that he was capable of implementing whatever he said with great effort, she accepted in untouchable family as he own. Once again Kasturba's ability to adopt and compromise triumphed.

In November 1917, Kasturba had responded to Mahatma Gandhi's call for social workers in Champaran and joined a team of teachers. She entered the huts of the villages, imparting to them the knowledge of cleanliness, good manners, order and discipline. But her real trials were yet to come. The first real trial was Mahatma Gandhi's imprisonment for six years in 1922 on a charge of sedition section and the heavy sentence was a crushing blow to her. She gathered and issued the spirited call to people of India.

In September 1924, when Mahatma Gandhi undertook a twenty one days fast for communal harmony, Kasturba faced the ordeal with rare fortitude and a touching resignation. She took active part in Mahatma Gandhi's life.

Kasturba took active part in the great national movement of India namely Non-cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movement. In March 1930, Gandhi organized the manufacture of salt without the government permission. He walked over three hundred and eighty kilometers from Sabarmati ashram to the seashore at Danti and made salt there. The walk became famous in the history of freedom struggle in India named as 'Dandi March' and the act as 'Salt Satyagraha'. Mahatma Gandhi was arrested and kept in jail. Kasturba toured village for meeting with workers, visiting the victims of police torture in hospitals and in their houses, and talking to the people to infuse courage and enthusiasm in them. When she returned to Sabarmati Ashram, she feel sad and suffering of people made her depressed and despondent. But there was an expression of firmness and determination on her face. Kasturba was now as a solidier of Satyagraha, engaged in a strong fight against the British rule.⁶

In 1930, Kasturba led a batch of ashram with women volunteers and picketed shops of foreign liquor. She did not know politics. In 1932, Kasturba participated to Satyagraha movement. She did the behavioural against the British rule, so the British government punished into prison. She suffered first six weeks of imprisonment in January, February and then of six months from March 15. But she was re-arrested and sent to prison for 6 months according to the judgment given by the Pardoli magistrate.

In September 1932, at the Yervada prison, Mahatma Gandhi entered a fast unto death protest against the segregation of untouchables into separate electorate. The third day he was indeed her death. Kasturba could not understand the reason for Mahatma Gandhi's fast, she also participated in it. She took only so much food as to maintain the strength needed to nurse them.

In 1933, Mahatma Gandhi dissolved to the Sabarmati Ashram. He was started ashram in Sevagram near Wardha. Kasturba was correspondent of this ashram. The members are needed to work for this ashram. In the same year the New York times reported that, Kasturba was arrested on a secret charge. She had been warned to leave the vicinity of Sabarmati prison, take up residence elsewhere another town, and retrain from civil disobedience, she refused, and the British government had to give in.⁷ Again Mahatma Gandhi announced a fast unto death for the cause of Harijans. Kasturba also joined him in his protest. The same day she began the fast and she was arrested along with fifteen other

women. Later, she was released only to be rearrested because she continued issuing public statements about her husband's fast.

Kasturba immediately arrested and imprisoned thereafter her youngest son Devadass marriage. Since then, one arrest followed the other with bewildering swiftness. She was nearly sixty five. She never asked for special consideration because of her age. She fasted in the prison, as Mahatma Gandhi did in his prison.⁸ In 1938, the Rajkot administration agreed to give certain political rights to the people, but later refused to do so. As a protest against this breach of faith, the people decided to offer Satyagraha. As soon as Kasturba heard this, she wanted to take part in the *Sathyagraha*, with Mahatma Gandhi's permission, she took part in it. She was arrested in Rajkot.⁹ She had gone there as a non-violent soldier of freedom and she believed that a soldier should never fight shy of facing hardship. Kasturba fell ill for bronchial pneumonia, while 'Quit India Movement' resolution was passed on 9th of August, 1942 by the All India Congress Committee in Bombay. Mahatma Gandhi had to deliver a speech in Shivaji Park the next day. But he was arrested in the early hours. Kasturba resolved to address that evening, in the same place, a mass meeting which Mahatma Gandhi was to have addressed, but she would speak in the place.

The police sent a warning that if she tried to speak at the meeting, she would also be arrested. Kasturba had not paid her attention to the warning and proceeded for the park. She paying no-attention, the police man arrested them. They were sent to the Aga Khan palace in Poona, where Mahatma Gandhi was imprisoned. The other prisons, she had been permitted to see all the inmates, chat with them, watch them come and go. But in the Aga Khan Palace, political prisoners were a tiny group kept apart Kasturba was not allowed to correspond with them.¹⁰ All the stress and other inconvenience in the palace had led to loss of soul of Kasturba Gandhi on February 22, 1944.¹¹ The members of the Pudukottai Legislative Council managed to get permission from the British Government to move a resolution by which they were to recommend to the government to communicate their heartfelt compassion over the death of Kasturba Gandhi.¹²

Kasturba played a prominent role in the life of Mahatma Gandhi. She was traditional Indian wife and took excellent care of Mahatma Gandhi. Mahatma Gandhi learnt the concept of non-violence from Kasturba. She stood with him pillar of support. She was a true partner of Gandhiji in all respects.

End Notes

1. Sree Devirajan, *Remembering our Leaders – Kasturba Gandhi*, New Delhi, 2000, p. 49.
2. Rezaulkarim, *Mother Kasturba Gandhi*, Calcutta, 1944, p. 28.
3. M.V. Venkatraman, *Nattukku Uzhaitha Nallavargal – Kasturba Gandhi* (Tamil), Chennai, 1969 (Rep.), pp. 35-36.
4. Mahatma Gandhi (Tamil Translator R.Venkatarajalu), *Sathya Sothanai (An Auto Biography)*, Ahmedabad, (Rep), 2002, p. 473.
5. Sree Devi Rajan, *Op.cit.*, p. 59.
6. Indian Opinion, Kasturba Gandhi Memorial 22nd March, 1944, Delhi.

7. Kasturba Gandhi Memorial Edition, Delhi, 1982, p. 14.
8. Mukul Bhai Kalarthi, *Ba and Bapu*, Ahamadabad, 1962, p. 40.
9. R.K. Prabu, *Sati Kasturba Gandhi, A Life*, Bombay, 1944, p. 82.
10. Susila Nayar, *Kasturba*, Ahmedabad, 1960, p. 84.
11. Arun Gandhi, *Kasturba - A Life*, New Delhi, 2000, p. 298.
12. Proceedings of Pudukottai Legislative Council, Vol.XC, Pudukottai, 1944, p. 15.