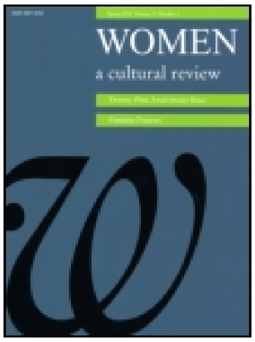

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Married to the mahatma: The predicament of Kasturba Gandhi

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'It seems to me that the root cause which attracted the public to Kasturba was her ability to lose herself in me.' So wrote Gandhi in the forward to his wife's biography, written shortly after Kasturba's death in 1944 (Nayar 1960). Kasturba was married to Gandhi for sixty-two years. She stuck by him throughout his radical transformations from petulant schoolboy in provincial Gujarat to sophisticated London-trained lawyer, from civil rights activist in South Africa to world-famous political and spiritual leader in India. During their years together, she bore him four sons (their first child, not counted here, died shortly after birth), shared in his experiments in communal living and underwent detention at the hands of the British several times. But despite having lived her life on the centre stage of modern Indian history, her profile remains obscure—'lost' in the Mahatma's shadow.[1]

The search for the Mahatma's wife is a difficult one. Like many women of her times, she was barely literate. We cannot *read* Kasturba Gandhi; we can only read *about* her—approaching her too often through her husband's words. Insights can be gleaned from a few slim volumes of reminiscences but these, too, rely heavily on Gandhi's autobiography. Then there are the numerous hazy sketches penned by Indians and foreigners who lived or

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1 'Mahatma', meaning 'Great Soul', was an honorific title given to M. K. Gandhi by his followers, many of whom perceived him as a saint.

Postage stamp, taken from 1934 photograph courtesy of Mani Bhavan)

stayed with the Gandhis at different stages of their lives. Here Kasturba is usually portrayed as a simple, home-spun woman, stern and practical, physically present but peculiarly removed from Gandhi's political and spiritual life.

Kasturba's inaccessibility is, then, compounded by her character. She had her differences with Gandhi and sometimes lost her temper but, more often than not, kept her opinions to herself. The result is that many remember her more for her silence than her words. And even when she broke that silence, we are still left wondering how to interpret her muffled voice. The following episode, perhaps more than any other, exemplifies the difficulty.

A woman named Lilavati once wrote to Kasturba, claiming to have observed how unhappy she was living with Gandhi. There was nothing unusual about this observation except that it was made to Kasturba herself. Her reply, shakily written in Gujarati, is perhaps the only written testimony she has left on so personal a subject:

Blessed Lilavati,[2]

Your letter has pierced me badly. There has never been much time for you and I to talk, so how come you should know that Gandhiji makes me unhappy? Can you really say you saw my face look sad or that Gandhiji caused me trouble over food when you were here? There must be no other husband in the world as great as mine. He is worshipped by people all over the world for his pursuit of truth. Thousands come to seek his advice. He has never found fault with me, except when I was actually wrong and deserving. I may not be far-sighted and my vision may be narrow but they say that is true [of women] all over the world. Gandhiji discusses things in the newspapers, other husbands just sit at home making trouble. If I am held in great esteem among friends, it is only

2 The ancient Gujarati greeting used here means one who is blessed by the completeness of having a husband who is alive. It also implies, 'May your husband live long!'.

> because of him. My relatives also show me great affection. So nobody is going to believe your claim. I am not like you modern wives who wish to lord it over your husbands and if the latter don't give in, you go your separate ways. Such behaviour ill becomes a virtuous Hindu wife.
>
> Parvati's wish was that Shankar would be her husband not only for this and past lives but for generations to come,
>
> From Kasturba Gandhi[3]

According to her granddaughter, Sumitra Kulkarni, Kasturba had wanted the letter to be published in the newspapers. But Gandhi, not wanting to encourage the notion that she might be unhappy, forbade the publication. And so the letter was filed away by one of Gandhi's secretaries.[4]

Taken together, the letter and its burial are as concealing as they are revealing. Kasturba's opinions correspond so closely to those expected of a devout Hindu wife that it is impossible, and perhaps inappropriate, to disentangle the personal from the cultural. And as if this were not enough to guarantee Kasturba's inaccessibility, Gandhi completes the effacement by preventing her from voicing even this much. The entire episode is, of course, confirmation of the patriarchal nature of their relationship, but might also serve as a point of entry for an exploration of Kasturba's particular predicament as the wife of the Mahatma.

The Struggles of a Hindu Wife

That Kasturba aspired to be an ideal Hindu wife is perhaps the clearest message of her letter. Her indignation at the notion that she might be perceived as unhappy, her unquestioning veneration of her husband and her parting reference to the goddess Parvati who, according to mythology, killed herself in defence of her husband's name, may read today like sociological evidence of the poor position of women in traditional Hindu society. But if we are to 'give voice' to Kasturba we need to try to understand such aspirations in her terms.

In a society where tradition-bound Hindu wives were (and still are) expected to worship their husbands, a wife's primary obligation was to abide by her husband's will. Kasturba may have been anxious to fulfil this injunction but her marriage to Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was far from ideal from the start. Engaged at the age of six and married at thirteen, Kasturba was to find her husband (six months her junior) both possessive and manipulative. 'I wanted to *make* my wife an ideal wife', Gandhi confesses in his autobiography. 'My ambition was to *make* her live a pure life, learn what I learnt and identify her life and thought with mine' (Gandhi 1929:15). Kasturba proved resistant to his manipulation, including his attempts to educate her, with the result that the two frequently argued, ending their disputes by a mutual refusal to speak to one another. Later, suspecting her of

3 Cited in Kulkarni 1988:38.

4 In a letter to Kishorelal Mashruwala, Gandhi writes: 'Ba [Kasturba] has on her own written a letter to Lilavati. That letter is worth reading. I did not send it to Lilavati but gave it to Mahadev and he has preserved it. You can see it some day' (cf. CWMG vol. 92: 27–8). This would appear to be a reference to Kasturba's letter cited above, suggesting that it was written in the summer of 1929 and was never sent to Lilavati.

Kasturba Gandhi with children in the Parsee dress Gandhi insisted they wore in their early years together in South Africa (courtesy of National Gandhi Museum)

unfaithfulness, Gandhi smashed her bangles—a gesture symbolizing the dissolution of marriage—and sent her back to her parent's home and refused to have anything to do with her for an entire year (CWMG vol. 72:127). The relationship was barely repaired when Gandhi left the country, spending four years in London followed by three in South Africa. By the time Kasturba and her two sons accompanied him to South Africa in 1896, the couple had spent little more than a few months together over the previous eight years. The next two decades in South Africa were, however, spent in close proximity.

This was the period in which Gandhi developed his ideas and practices concerning self-sufficiency, voluntary poverty, strict dietetics and total celibacy—ideas to which Kasturba had to adapt.

There is ample evidence, even from Gandhi's account, that Kasturba followed his path of perpetual renunciation more through wifely duty than desire.[5] Like most women of her background she enjoyed tasty food, fine clothes and jewellery. When Gandhi once tried to defend his frugality by claiming that he had never physically deprived her of silks and ornaments, she made her position clear: 'But how could I use them when I saw you leading a life of self-abnegation? I had no alternative but to fall into line with you' (cited in Kalarthi 1962:5). That Gandhi had given her 'no alternative' is borne out by his own account of how he sold her wedding jewellery on his return from England and how he forced her to return gifts of jewellery offered by Natal Indians in 1901. Kasturba had fought tearfully to retain the gifts, arguing that she had slaved away sufficiently to deserve them and that they might be needed, if not by her, then at least by her future daughters-in-law. But ultimately, as so often happened, Gandhi 'extorted' her consent—his word (Gandhi 1929:178–9). The question of a wife's jewellery was by no means trivial. Not only was it often her only security but it was also considered an essential component of her beauty and an auspicious marker of her marital status. Stripped of marriage bangles and the *mangul sutra* (a type of necklace worn only by wives), a woman was identified as a widow—one of the most despised categories of orthodox Hindu society. It is no doubt for this reason that Kasturba insisted on retaining a pair of simple bangles to the end.

Though Kasturba's self-sacrificing nature is generally given pride of place in the literature about her, there seems little doubt that she harboured a deep-seated resentment for some of Gandhi's experiments. Glimpses can be gained from another row—this time excluded from his autobiography. The year was 1914 when Kasturba was recovering from a critical illness. In a tearful rage, she accused Gandhi, who was nursing her at the time, of depriving her of decent food in order to kill her. He was 'a hooded-snake', tired of having her around and determined to get rid of her under the guise of practising dietary reform. Gandhi saw in the incident proof that his wife contained within her 'the devil and the divine in a most concentrated form'. In a letter to his friend Hermann Kallenbach, he wrote: 'She has a character and she has none. She is the most venomous woman I have ever met. She never forgets, never forgives . . . All the charges she brought against me she undoubtedly means . . . Yes, a man who wishes to work with detachment must not marry' (CWMG suppl. vol. 6:181).

If Kasturba felt that Gandhi perceived her as an impediment to his work, her suspicion was not unfounded. His adoption of total celibacy in 1906 no doubt only added to her sense of dejection. Just one month before the row

5 See his comment in 1929: 'It is true that her renunciation has not been based on an intelligent appreciation of the fundamentals of life, but from a blind wifely devotion' (CWMG vol. 40: 210).

broke out, Gandhi had in fact been preparing for her funeral, declaring her recovery a virtual impossibility. But almost as if to defy his wish to be rid of her—real or perceived—Kasturba not only resisted death but also stuck by Gandhi for a further twenty-eight years. His retrospective claim that their relationship radically improved from the moment he took the vow of *brahmacharya* (celibacy) seems partly an expression of wishful thinking. In reality, we still find him complaining of Kasturba's 'obstructiveness' and of his own inability to control his anger years after taking the vow.

Kasturba's Predicament

Judging by her letter, Kasturba seems to have been as anxious to be an ideal wife as Gandhi was to make her one. How, then, can we understand her peculiar combination of resentment, resistance and compliance? Take, for example, the famous incident in Durban back in 1898 when Kasturba expressed reluctance to empty the chamber pot of a Christian clerk on the grounds that its contents were defiling. Kasturba eventually performed the humiliating task which would normally have fallen on a scavenger, but did it tearfully when Gandhi would have her do it 'cheerfully'. His loss of temper caused her to beg to be released from his household, but when the moment came, she called him to his senses. Gandhi was later to recall: 'If my wife could not leave me, neither could I leave her. We have had numerous bickerings but the end has always been peace between us. The wife with her matchless powers of endurance has always been the victor' (Gandhi 1929:222).

In expressing reluctance to empty the chamber pot Kasturba may have challenged Gandhi's authority but this did not necessarily mean she was forgetting her duty as his wife. On the contrary, it was normally considered the duty of a good Hindu wife to stay clear of defiling substances. Kasturba was merely trying to uphold culturally rooted orthodox principles. That she performed the task tearfully suggests she retained those principles, even as she acted against them. When later, back in India, she objected to the admission of Harijans into the ashram,[6] she was, once again, trying to maintain the purity of the domestic space as she saw fit. Gandhi's challenge to untouchability forced her into transgression: either she was to leave her husband (the solution he so often suggested) or she was to act against the beliefs and values she aspired to uphold. It was apparently other married women of the family who helped her resolve these choices, arguing: 'We might stick to our orthodox views and not allow untouchables into our homes or drink water touched by a Muslim, but these things are not for you. For you, the highest ideal is to follow your husband. Whatever you do in following him, no sin will attach to you' (cited in Nayar 1960:54).

One can better understand Kasturba's position once one realizes that following Gandhi meant not only acting against orthodox principles, but

6 'Harijan', meaning 'people of God', was the term introduced by Gandhi to refer to those low status groups who were conventionally considered defiling or 'untouchable'.

Kasturba in old age, photographed by her nephew, Kanu Gandhi (courtesy of National Gandhi Museum)

also against her own perception of how a good Hindu wife and mother ought to behave. Just as she had tried to retain the jewellery offered by South African supporters on the grounds that it was her duty to keep it for her future daughters-in-law, so she tried to defend her right to purchase clothing for her children and grandchildren on the grounds that it was a mother's duty to provide for her offspring. Gandhi was unsympathetic to such arguments. When the journalist Shri Natesan, witnessing Kasturba's prolonged disgruntledness over this issue, accused him of being a cruel husband, Gandhi apparently retorted:

> She knows full well my views and is well accustomed to my way of living. I have more than once implored her to live away from me and save herself the discomfort and live happily with her children. But she would not. She, like the faithful Hindu wife, insists on following me wherever I go (cited in Prabhu 1954:62).

It is, of course, significant that it should be Gandhi who so neatly sums up

Kasturba's predicament. She could not lead a comfortable life with her children because to do so would have meant abandoning her husband—the ultimate transgression (and a virtual impossibility) for a Hindu wife; but in remaining in the ashram with her husband, she could not be what she considered a good wife and mother to be. In the ashram she was expected to make no distinction between kin and non-kin. So when a rule was introduced that all visitors had to pay a fee to stay, Kasturba found herself reluctantly having to charge her own children for their visits (cf. Kalarthi 1962:37). Similarly, when she was once late for massaging Gandhi's head on account of the fact she had been preparing a special meal for their son, Ramdas, who was setting out on a journey, Gandhi reminded her that she was the 'mother' of all the 'children' of the ashram and therefore had no right to perform such favours. Kasturba's retort was:

> But Ramdas is my son . . . You are no doubt a *Mahatma* and all here are like your own sons to you. However, I am not as yet a *Mahatma*. This does not mean that I love the others less. But to tell the truth they are not to me like Ramdas . . . You are, indeed, very hard on me, even in such small matters (cited in Kalarthi 1962:42).

When Gandhi merely continued to lecture, Kasturba retreated into the silence through which they agreed to differ.[7]

But Kasturba was, as Gandhi himself acknowledged, a passive resistor. We therefore find her secretly hoarding cloth for her grandchildren, stashing away small gifts of money that were meant to be given over to the ashram funds and serving forbidden substances like coffee and tea to honoured guests like Jawaharlal Nehru and C. F. Andrews when they visited the ashram. In these petty acts of resistance we see her trying to assert her domestic rights and fulfil her womanly duties as she defined them.

A Case of Too Many Mothers

Kasturba's generalized status as 'mother' was affirmed by her being called 'Ba' (mother), and many ashramites remember her for the 'motherly affection' she bestowed on them. Even Gandhi claims to have looked upon her as his mother from the moment he took the vow of *brahmacharya* and ceased to view her as a wife (cf. CWMG vol. 35:265–6). What she felt about the complete negation of their sexual relationship we do not know.

Gandhi's veneration of 'the mother' as a symbol of purity and self-sacrifice went far beyond the admiration of women as mothers. His experiments with sexual abstinence were linked not only to his love of his own mother but with his desire to be an immaculate mother himself (cf. Erikson 1969:402–5). Gandhi made no secret of his own identification with so called 'womanly' qualities and, in later life, even called himself 'the mother' of his niece Manu. He also concerned himself with the minutiae of

7 In his autobiography, Gandhi confesses: 'It is likely that many of my doings have not her approval even today. We never discuss them. I see no good in discussing them' (Gandhi 1929:223).

domestic details such as nature cures, food preparation and dietary experiments. According to the feminist and activist Madhu Kishwar: 'This area of Gandhi's activity reveals him at his scientific and rational best. It also throws light on his essential humaneness which led him to try and approximate most closely to what has been defined as a "womanly" ideal—that of being nurturant, life giving and healing' (Kishwar 1985:1754). But, although Gandhi's motive was to alleviate the burden of women's chores and to invent a minimalist diet suitable for all Indians, it seems to me that, viewed from Kasturba's perspective, his domestic experiments created a problem. For the more Gandhi took on womanly roles, the more he robbed Kasturba of the traditional functions of a wife and mother. Just as the letter expressing her desire to be a good Hindu wife was ultimately suppressed, so her capacity to be a good wife and mother was partially negated, not only by the austerity of ashram living, but also by Gandhi's own adoption of the 'motherly' role.

Take the question of food. 'Ba was an excellent cook', writes Sushila Nayar, 'but after the introduction of control of the palate in the ashram, her art became useless, as it were' (Nayar 1960:71). It was, of course, Gandhi who decided what could and could not be eaten though Kasturba remained in charge of actual food preparation.[8] Similarly, where clothing was concerned, it was Gandhi who decided that women should give over their jewellery to the national cause and that all ashramites should swear to wear nothing but *khadi* (hand-spun hand-woven cloth) which was to solve India's political and economic enslavement (cf. Tarlo 1996:62–128). When Kasturba argued that home-spun *khadi* was too thick and that she could not cook his food dressed in such uncomfortable attire, he reacted by trading off one domestic role for another. If she could not cook wearing *khadi* then she had better not cook for him at all (cf. CWMG vol. 20:306). In short, being married to the Mahatma made it difficult for Kasturba to rule the domestic sphere, even if that was the sphere to which she had been assigned and in which she felt most comfortable.

But if Gandhi was to pervade the domestic sphere, this did not mean that he necessarily encouraged Kasturba into the political sphere. When the secretary of the Hindu Women's Association wrote to Kasturba in 1918, inviting her to preside over its annual celebration, Gandhi's written response was:

> Though each of us is independent and enjoys equal rights, we have divided our functions for the sake of convenience . . . My wife cannot prepare a lecture herself; nor do I think, can she read well enough for the Presidential Chair a lecture written out for her. She has no knowledge of your activities besides and cannot tell me what she would like to put in her lecture. We both of us therefore, beg to be excused by you all (cited in Desai 1968, vol. 1:225).

8 There are many references to Ba's so-called pettiness in the kitchen and to the fact that she ruled it with an iron hand (cf. Gandhi's letter to Esther Faering, CWMG vol. 16: 486, 499, 506). Deprived of the sensual and pleasurable aspects of food, she was left only with the laborious and organizational aspects.

There is perhaps a hint of bitterness in Gandhi's admission of his wife's illiteracy and her lack of knowledge of current affairs. Kasturba, much to his frustration, had proved resistant to his many attempts to educate her—something he blamed initially on his own youthful lust and later on his involvement in public life.

Like her attempts to read and write, Kasturba's political commitment remained limited and sporadic by comparison to that of some Indian women who threw themselves more readily into the nationalist struggle for freedom. It is true that she was willing to court arrest as a *satyagrahi* (non-violent resistor) both in South Africa and in India and that the mere fact of her presence by Gandhi's side on numerous occasions was probably enough to encourage other traditionally-inclined women into participation. But it is also true that for most of her life she showed remarkably little interest in the historic events that were happening around her. As one ashramite observed: 'I think she was happiest when she was cooking or cleaning, sewing or spinning and looking after everyone' (cited in Mehta 1977:19). Significantly her most politically active moments were when Gandhi was in jail. In 1931, for example, she delivered speeches in his place and toured the troubled villages of Kaira exorting peasants to adopt *khadi*. The young journalist who accompanied her felt her briefly transformed by this spate of activity, but when he met her again in 1935 he found that she had retreated back to her role as 'custodian of Gandhiji's physical well-being every minute of her life' (Prabhu 1944:61).

Passive Resistance to the End

Gandhi once said of Kasturba: 'It is Ba's unique virtue that whether she likes it or not, she ultimately complies with my wishes' (cited in Kalarthi 1962:21). For most of her life she was in his service: supervising every detail of his food, drink or massage; nursing him when he was ill, supporting his activities and, like a devoted Hindu wife, praying for his longevity. In the process she accepted many things from poverty to imprisonment, from Gandhi's choice of celibacy to his obvious spiritual and physical closeness to other women.[9] She must also have gained the satisfaction she mentions in her letter of serving one of the most remarkable figures of the century and knowing that she performed that service as well as he would permit. But, although she resigned herself increasingly to his will in later years, Kasturba never lost her capacity for resistance. Sushila Nayar's moving account of her dying years reveals the extent to which she retained her conventional values to the last, even and in spite of being married to the Mahatma.

Kasturba was arrested shortly after Gandhi during the Quit India Movement of 1942. Both were incarcerated in the Aga Khan Palace prison along with Sushila Nayar, Gandhi's secretaries and others. Depressed and unwell, Kasturba chastised Gandhi: 'Didn't I tell you not to pick a quarrel

9 There were a number of educated women with whom Gandhi enjoyed discussing his work and ideas, including Kamaladevi Chaudhurani, Sarojini Naidu and Mirabehn (Madeleine Slade)—a British disciple whom Kasturba actively disliked. With other women followers Gandhi developed a physical closeness which culminated in sexual experiments whereby he would test his powers of abstinence by sleeping naked between

with this Government? You did not listen to me and now we all have to pay the penalty.' Gandhi reacted with silence—the old technique by which they had learned to resist each other. After a few days of reflection, Kasturba enquired: 'Why do you ask the English to quit India? Our country is vast. We can all live here. Let them stay if they like, but tell them to stay as our brothers' (cited in Nayar 1960:59). Kasturba retained her political naiveté to the end, unable, or perhaps unwilling, to identify with the wider issues that so occupied her husband. She also retained much of her old orthodoxy. When Gandhi's Brahman secretary, Mahadev Desai, died in jail, Kasturba was disturbed that the death of a Brahman should lie on their shoulders. Perhaps in atonement, she saved fruit and milk for a Brahman boy who worked in the palace kitchens, arguing: 'After all, he is a Brahman lad. We can do no *dharma* [religious duty] in this jail. Let us at least give something to the Brahman when we can' (Nayar 1960:58).

Where her own children were concerned, Kasturba never relinquished the special bond she had developed with them in spite of her adoption of 'the whole world as her family' (Nayar 1960:66). When Gandhi introduced a rule that prisoners should not write letters to their nearest of kin, Kasturba broke it by dictating letters for her children. She never ceased to worry about their oldest son Harilal who had taken to the streets and was bitterly estranged from Gandhi. Acknowledging Gandhi's inability to take care of the immediate family, she passed on the responsibility to her youngest son Devdas, shortly before she died, saying: 'Bapu is a saint. He has to think of the whole world . . . So the care of the family must fall on your lot' (Nayar 1960:92).

Concerning food, Kasturba's quarrels with Gandhi continued until the end. On the festival day of Makar Sankranti, she instructed her fellow inmates to make special ritual sweets for distribution to prison convicts. When Gandhi chastised her that such things were appropriate for homes, not jails, Kasturba replied quite simply: 'But there is no home going for me' (Nayar 1960:53). The sweets were duly made and distributed by a wheel-chair-bound Kasturba. Disagreement again broke out, first when she wanted to taste the special dish of 'paran puri' prepared for the doctor and later when she expressed her desire to eat aubergine cooked with ghee. When Gandhi told her she had better control her palate for reasons of health, Kasturba lost her temper and, adopting the old technique of passive resistance, refused to eat anything other than milk, fruit, water and honey for almost fifteen days. Even on her death bed she was struggling to assert her rights, telling the doctor: 'These people try to force their own law upon me. They won't even give me a dose of castor oil.' Eventually, after much discussion, a few drops were administered. Two days later, when Gandhi asked if he could go on his usual morning walk, Kasturba replied 'No'. He sat down beside her; she rested her head on his breast and died shortly after.

young women. This controversial practice is thought to have begun whilst Kasturba was still alive and continued after her death. How she felt about it is not known.

In fulfilment of her own request, Kasturba's body was wrapped in a *khadi* sari made from yarn which had been spun by Gandhi. In that sari we can read devotion, but we can also read confinement. Her life, like her body, had been so wrapped up in her husband's existence that even the warp and weft of her shroud was of his creation.

Unravel that yarn, lift off that shroud, and what do we find? Perhaps little more than our own desire, as educated modern women, to find something else. In *Kasturba and Women's Empowerment*, a volume celebrating the 125th anniversary of her birth, attempts are made to rediscover Kasturba's hidden importance. Two ghosts emerge recurrently from the ashes: one the deified wife and mother (nothing new there); the other a veritable champion of the women's cause. The first, in elevating her capacity for suffering, does little more than validate oppressive patriarchal values; the second, in underplaying her passivity, fails to recognize the extent to which she had internalized those values and lived her life accordingly. More convincing are the various attempts to locate Kasturba's importance in her influence on Gandhi. Rashmi Sudha Puri's essay, for example, explores her role as Gandhi's teacher in non-violence, basing her analysis on Gandhi's own claim that he first learned the technique of *satyagraha* from his wife's refusal to submit to his attempts to control her in their early married life. I would like to take this one step further. In suggesting that Kasturba's resistance to Gandhi continued—in more or less submerged forms—to the end of her life, I would argue that she not only inspired his initial adoption of the technique but must also have acted as a constant reminder to him of its strength and impenetrability. But this still leaves the problem of how far Kasturba's role as a passive resistor should be celebrated.

Gandhi's use of non-violent resistance as a means of opposing both British and Indian forms of oppression was undeniably creative and Kasturba was sometimes willing to join him in that struggle. But it seems to me that, for her, 'passive resistance' remained essentially a technique for defending her traditional rights and values in the face of her husband's experiments. The irony is that in resisting Gandhi—whilst at the same time following him as his wife—Kasturba simultaneously resisted some of the more liberating aspects of his 'message' such as his attempts to challenge the more oppressive aspects of Hinduism and to oppose the 'blind slavery' by which Indian women were subordinated to their husbands.[10] There is a certain ambivalence in Gandhi's statement that the 'root cause' which attracted the public to Kasturba was her ability 'to lose herself' in him. Such a quality was perhaps more appreciated by the orthodox 'public' than by Gandhi himself. Ultimately, however much we admire her capacity for resistance, we should also recognize that it is in the 'passive resistance' of women like Kasturba that we find a barrier to most forms of social change.

After Kasturba's death, Gandhi received a telegram which read: 'Deeply

10 This is not to argue that Gandhi's attitude to women was always liberating (as his attitude to Kasturba demonstrates only too well), but that it had its liberating aspects. For an excellent discussion of the various strands of Gandhi's thoughts on women, see Kishwar 1985.

grieved to hear that "Ba" has passed away. Matter for sincere thankfulness she has parted *Sowbhagyavati*, a thing our women pray for.' The writer, Madan Mohan Malaviya, was referring to the fact that Kasturba had succeeded in fulfilling the ultimate wifely 'honour' and 'duty' of dying before her husband (cited in Bright n.d.:104). Other messages heralded her as the embodiment of Indian womanhood who lived her life like Sita in 'single-minded surrender' and 'self-effacement' (Bright n.d.:103, 110). Kasturba would no doubt have appreciated such assessments. But would she have appreciated this attempt to show how, in order to be 'an ideal wife' as she saw it, she often had to resist her husband? The answer—by now predictable—lies in her letter.

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