
Kastur – Wife of Mahatma Gandhi

by

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There is no record of the exact day of Kastur Kapadia's birth. In ancient India, official birth records were never properly kept. We know grandmother was born in 1869, the same year as grandfather, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. They were also born in the same town: the coastal city of Porbandar, in western India. It is said the difference in their ages is just a few months and Ba, as we called grandmother, was about six months older than Bapu, grandfather. There is no record of the exact day of Kastur Kapadia's birth. In ancient India, official birth records were never properly kept. We know grandmother was born in 1869, the same year as grandfather, Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi. They were also born in the same town: the coastal city of Porbandar, in western India. It is said the difference in their ages is just a few months and Ba, as we called grandmother, was about six months older than Bapu, grandfather.

Kastur was a middle child, sandwiched between two brothers, the only daughter of wealthy and indulgent parents – Gokaldas and Vrajkunwar Kapadia. Gokaldas was a leading citizen and one-time Mayor of Porbandar. He inherited the trading house dealing in cloth, grain and cotton shipments to markets in Africa and what was then known as Arabia. Despite their wealth the Kapadias did not live ostentatiously. Their home, though well appointed and handsomely furnished, had no garden or outdoor courtyard where children could play. A few houses down the lane was the Gandhi family home which had a small, private courtyard. Since the two families were friends and neighbours, it seems likely that the Kapadia children and the Gandhi children, played in the open courtyard.

They may not have been playmates for long, however. Girls and boys, growing up in orthodox Hindu families lived in separate worlds. Kastur did not go to school but learned the art of being a good wife, mother and housekeeper. And since girls in India were married at a very young age, they had to learn their marital responsibilities at an age when small girls today would be entering kindergarten. Sometime in the year 1876, when Kastur and Mohan were both seven years old, their parents reached

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a preliminary agreement for their betrothal. Little Mohan was the fourth and last child of Karamchand and his much younger fourth wife Putliba. At that age neither of the two knew the significance of what was taking place but they received some splendid presents which made them both happy.

Because the story of Kasturba Gandhi's life has for so long been enmeshed in, or overshadowed by, the story of Mahatma Gandhi, it is difficult to establish facts about her early years. When I went in search of family records to piece together the story of the Kapadia family I learned that the disastrous floods in the 1930s had destroyed all documents, letters and photographs. The actual wedding did not take place until 1882 – six years after their betrothal. According to family recollections, two other Kapadia daughters whom Kastur never knew, had died several years before she was born. By all accounts Kastur was an enchanting youngster: intelligent, independent, fearless and unusually pretty. Mohan's father Karamchand proposed the three brothers would get married simultaneously to reduce the cost of the wedding for the bride's parents. In the Indian tradition, the wedding is always hosted by the bride's parents and often can be ruinously expensive. The ceremonies begin at least a week before the wedding and friends and relatives from afar come to rejoice on the occasion. Although they were married the couple did not live together until they were sixteen and passed puberty. Kastur would come and go back to her parent's home giving her a chance to gradually get acclimatized to the new home. Not long after she settled in her new home Kastur noticed a change in the quiet, likeable boy she had married. In order to play the typical role of a dominant Indian husband, Mohandas was becoming very possessive and jealous.

It all started when he bought several little pamphlets at the bazaar, the sort of thing written in those days to educate young husbands about their conjugal rights and responsibilities. Aware that he had much to learn, Mohandas read the booklets from cover to cover. What impressed him was not the practical advice given, but the commendable exhortation that a husband must always be faithful to his wife. He found that idea compelling. And not just because it appealed to what he later described as his "innate passion for truth". Mohandas was in the throes of first love. He was "passionately fond" of Kastur; he could think of nothing else all day long. To be false to her was unthinkable. To him it was obvious that a wife, too, should pledge faithfulness; however his adolescent strategy for insuring mutual fidelity was both unsophisticated and unenlightened. He concluded it was the duty of the faithful husband to exert his authority over his wife and to make sure she kept her pledge.

One night Mohandas announced to Kastur that from now on he wanted to be kept fully informed about where she went and when, and about whom she met and why. In fact, he declared, she should not go out of the house without his consent. However, the notion of having to request permission from Mohandas for her every move sounded like oppression to Kastur. With her many household duties, she seldom had time to gallivant. She only accompanied other Gandhi women to call on friends or neighbours, or go with Putliba to the nearby temple for prayers. None of the other women went to their husbands for permission to go out, so why should she? My grandmother's spirit was always proud and free. Those who remembered her testified that Ba would never allow anyone to dictate to her – not even her husband. Yet her manner was naturally accommodating; never challenging. And her instincts

were essentially conservative. She had no inborn desire to flout tradition. This would change in the years to come.

On the night of their first confrontation, Kastur assured Mohandas she would always be a faithful wife. For her, any other course was unthinkable. She raised no objections to the restrictions he proposed. But she made no promise to observe them.

The next day without consulting Mohandas, Kastur arranged to go with Putliba to the temple for prayers. How could Mohandas object? She went to the temple again the following day and the next. The day after that Kastur went with her sisters-in-law to call on friends. By actions, not words, she was making it clear to Mohandas how much she objected to his high-handedness.

Mohandas reacted vigorously and attempted to impose even more restraints. They had their first quarrel. "Are you suggesting that I should obey you and not your mother", Kastur asked. The new husband had no answer.

"When she or other elders in the house ask me to go out with them am I to tell them that I cannot stir out of the house without my husband's permission". Finally, Mohandas acknowledged that Kastur was not the girl to brook such restraints. The orders were rescinded and normal life resumed. The young husband learned a hard truth about his wife. She obeyed as she chose. Unless he could convince her of the correctness of his decisions, she was prepared to quietly ignore them and go her own way. Their life together was not always a bed of roses. There were tumultuous times, like with any other couple, but they remained close and faithful to each other.

Since I lived with my parents and grew up in South Africa my recollection of grandmother is confined to the few months I spent with her when I was five years old. I do recall that life in Sewagram Ashram in Wardha, Central India, was simple and the food was almost tasteless – just boiled without any seasoning. There were no desserts either. However, grandmother sometimes flouted this rule with impunity because she knew I had a strong sweet tooth. She would quietly make some peanut brittles and keep them hidden in her room. Several times a day she would invite me to her room and slyly feed me the peanut brittle.

There were times in her early life when she refused to abide by grandfather's rules until she was convinced that it needed to be done. One of the rules that she found most difficult to accept was the cleaning of toilets. In ancient India, private homes had bucket toilets which had to be cleaned at least twice a day. Often in towns and villages these buckets, sometimes full to the brim, had to be carried several miles outside the town limits and emptied. The people who did this work were paid very little. Consequently, they did not have the facilities to clean themselves and wear clean clothes. They became known as untouchables and formed the basis of the caste system.

Grandfather saw the inhumanity of the system and the evil of caste prejudice that it supported and decided to break it by doing one's own dirty work. This was something very difficult for Kastur to understand. She had no education and, therefore, no exposure to changing times and thoughts. She was rooted in tradition and believed if a system existed for five thousand years it had to be good. Why was it now necessary to change it!

It took many months of almost daily arguments and personal examples of grandfather cleaning public toilets to convince her that there was some merit in the

new thinking. Then she whole-heartedly participated in the work and accepted “untouchables” as fellow humans.

On another occasion when women of a nearby Women’s Ashram decided to visit Sewagram Ashram on October 2 to participate in grandfather’s birthday celebrations they were told to bring their own food because Sewagram Ashram had no money to entertain guests. About a dozen women arrived at the ashram and at lunch time when the Ashram inmates gathered in the dining hall for lunch the guests sat under a tree to eat their box lunches. Grandmother saw them and wondered why they were not joining the community. She walked up to them and asked: “Why are you sitting here and not with us in the dining hall”.

The leading lady explained: “Bapuji told us to bring our own food and not expect any hospitality from this ashram. So we thought we will sit separately and eat what we brought”. “That old man doesn’t know anything about hospitality”. Kastur said with a smile. “Forget about him, come with me and we will eat together”.

Perhaps the most heart-wrenching episode between the couple occurred in the Aga Khan Prison in Pune when both of them and a few other colleagues were incarcerated for demanding that the British leave India. All his life Mohandas rued the fact that his wife was illiterate. Prison was the only time he could tutor Kastur. He had bought her a black slate and some chalk to practice writing. Kastur knew that a slate and chalk were used by children in the kindergarten and she was an adult and wanted to be treated as such. “I am not going to write on this slate”, she announced. “I need a proper notebook and a pen”. “No”, Mohandas said. “You will get a notebook when you can write without making mistakes. We can’t afford to waste paper”. She pushed the slate aside and walked away. A few days later she found a new notebook on Mohandas’ table and she thought he had a change of mind. So, she took the book and a pen and started scribbling on the page. When Mohandas walked in he was aghast. “What are you doing with my notebook”, he expressed his annoyance. “Did I not tell you to write on the slate?” Kastur flung the notebook on his table and walked out in a huff saying: “Keep your precious notebook and pen. I don’t want it and I don’t want your education”. A week later she became seriously ill and subsequently died. She was cremated on the prison grounds and for the four-five hours it took for the flames to reduce her body to ashes Mohandas sat praying next to the pyre. Sixty years of an amazing journey had come to an end.

When I moved to India as an adult and took up a job as a journalist for *The Times of India* I was disturbed by the fact that history had ignored the important contribution that grandmother had made in many ways, not the least of which was, to maintain a happy relationship so that grandfather could flourish. There was not a single definitive biography of hers available in the market. I decided to research her life, mainly through oral history, and a few references made by grandfather in his writings. It took me almost ten years to write the biography titled *The Forgotten Woman – The Untold Story of Kastur, wife of Mahatma Gandhi*. It took me another fifteen years to find a publisher willing to look at the manuscript. It was only in the late 1990s that I met Dolores Cannon, owner of a small publishing house in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas, who eventually printed the book. Over the years I sold a few thousand copies by taking them with me on my lecture tours in the United States.

This is an excerpt from that book.