IN SEARCH OF
KASTURBA
AN AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL READING OF
THE MAHATMA AND HIS WIFE

LAVANYA VARADRAJAN

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A MONOGRAPH

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION:
AN OVERVIEW OF THE FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

1.1 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study attempts to address the following objectives:

- To examine auto/biography as a problematic genre in its representation of ‘factual information’ on the life of Kasturba Gandhi
- To scrutinise the presentation of facts about Kasturba, in Gandhi’s autobiography, The Story of My Experiments with Truth, as also a selection of biographies / memoirs on Gandhi that feature Kasturba as a key player
- To study how auto/biography as a narrative form attempts to locate the principal subjects of this study, namely Kasturba and Gandhi in a specific socio-cultural, historical and political context
- To investigate the difference in approach by male and female biographers/memoirists in addressing the presence/absence of Kasturba in biographical narratives through a close reading of pertinent passages in the texts chosen for this purpose
- To assess auto/biographical literature selected for this study and its representation/construction of Kasturba Gandhi through a feminist lens

1.2 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK OF THE STUDY

Before we undertake an analysis of the representation/construction of Kasturba Gandhi in a selection of auto/biographical texts, it is important to outline the two key perspectives through which we will be examining Kasturba and Gandhi, the subjects of this study: namely a critical study of auto/biography as a genre, and feminism. The focus on auto/biography as a narrative idiom owes itself to the idea that auto/biographical literature is a popular form that facilitates crucial links between the readers, and the subject(s) it attempts to document and, in the process, construct. These links enable readers of auto/biographical writing to arrive at a rational, consistent and definitive image of the subjects they seek to uncover. “Life Histories” have a “wide, if not universal appeal” according to David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn, in the introduction to Telling Lives in India: Biography, Autobiography and Life
History (Arnold and Blackburn 1). Such life stories may be told in order to “entertain or admonish us, to encourage emulation or inspire repugnance and fear” (1). Arnold and Blackburn further believe that the desire to publish a life history, as a matter of fact, rests within us all, making it all the more accessible and popular as a literary genre. In her book, Missing Persons: The impossibility of auto/biography, Mary Evans says that while we are accustomed to classify autobiography as non-fiction, it might be more useful to view it, instead, as a “mythical construct of our society and our social needs” (Evans 1). These social needs, she goes on to say, stem from the “compelling wish of many people to experience life as an organised and coherent process, in which rational choices are made” (1).

It is important here to offer a distinction between auto/biography and memoir as literary idioms. While the two terms are often used interchangeably in common parlance, an auto/biography is typically defined as the “story of a person’s life written by that person” or by “somebody else,” whereas a memoir is a “written account of somebody’s life, a place or an event” (Oxford English Dictionary 88, 138, 959). The former, by definition, is expected to cover a gamut of substantive experiences of a particular subject, typically tracing a significant growth curve from birth all the way to a point of maturity in terms of age and station in the subject’s life, while the latter can choose to focus on a specific period or aspect in a subject’s personal history. Ian Jack views the autobiography as a “record of accomplishment” written by “all kinds of people, more or less famous” (Jack 1). The ambition of the memoir, on the other hand, is “to be interesting in itself” (1). Propelled by the desire to be thought of as “literary”, it borrows, what Jack calls, “the tricks of the novel, of fiction” because it does not wish to merely “record the past,” the memoir wants “to recreate it” (1). This distinction is vital to the study at hand, because we have chosen to include memoir within the ambit of our scrutiny of auto/biographical writing, owing to the paucity of material available on the principal subject, namely Kasturba. Each idiom comes with its own tools, and is defined by the subjectivities of their authors in different ways.

Auto/biographies locate their subjects within, what Evans refers to, as “a particular zeitgeist” (Evans 12). This allows readers to understand and appreciate them as products of a particular time and place in history, as also the specific socio-economic, political and cultural milieu that informs their personal narratives. To that extent, auto/biographies are often largely viewed as quasi-historical documents. Arnold and Blackburn say that life histories, more importantly, have an inherent and wide appeal because they “straddle the elusive divide between personal narrative and objective truth” (Arnold and Blackburn 4). Auto/biographical writing, therefore, has been premised upon on two consistently overarching assumptions. The first is that, far from being a fiction that merely seeks to entertain, it is a “meaningful exploration of life” which is invested in bringing to the fore
“emotional and social realities” that would otherwise “elude identification and explanation” (4). The second assumption is that it is an integral source for understanding the emergence of “the modern sense of self, of individualism and self-consciousness as opposed to collective identity” (5). Evans equates the telling of a life in a documented form with a verbal exchange of information that highlights our fascination with the lives of others. What prevents auto/biography from being reduced to the status of the “literary equivalent of gossip,” she declares, is that it is “generally assumed to aspire to some version of absolute and inclusive truth” (1).

Such truth is also approached by the average reader, as unmediated and unvarnished by the subjectivity of the narrator of the life story, whether in the form of a direct, first-person telling, or through the perspective of a biographer. And it is such an assumption that this study attempts to challenge. Evans says what constitutes an essential ingredient of autobiography is “individual terror at the thought of dying without a written record” (Evans 2). It is then a literary genre that she views as coeval to literate societies which are innately driven by a desire to record their ethos. And yet, she also points out, that individual accounts have been written into oral histories, fairy stories, folk tales, mythical legends and nursery rhymes, all of which have elements of auto/biographical narratives in them. Evans also refers to a “steady production” of autobiographies and biographies through the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, which are organised as “moral tales,” with the subjects “overcoming specific hardships or illnesses, living through difficult times, or finding personal happiness...” (2). This is a vital aspect of the writing of a life history, because in locating its subjects within specific contexts, and also using them as vehicles through which a reader can identify aspects of his or her own life, auto/biography as a narrative idiom is shaped automatically within the decisive parameters of what Evans calls a “moralistic genre” (84). It also embodies, in some measure, the qualities, albeit in non-fiction, of the classic bildungsroman.

Jessica Geva draws our attention to the idea that, in contemporary criticism, there is a tendency to conflate autobiography with confession. Individuals “who opt for the poetics of autobiography to portray their literary subjectivity,” she says, “commit to its confessional injunction to tell all and examine all” (Geva 1). As a corollary, she posits that “autobiographical reticence” contained in a “deliberate privileging of particular life-writing options” could be construed as “intentional literary self-effacement” in a bid to avoid “self-examination and self-recognition” (1). In another essay, “Auto/biography as a Research Method,” Evans refers to auto/biography as “the most individual of literary genres,” with “its very existence premised on the belief in the particularity of the individual” (34). It is in the representation/construction of this individual in consonance with, or opposition to, a
larger socio-economic, political and cultural fabric within which s/he emerges and operates, that one is also likely to find silences, exclusions and effacements of other key players, comrades, partners, colleagues, mentors and family: silences, exclusions and effacements that this study seeks to uncover. All forms of life history, then, deserve to be treated as “partial texts,” which need to offer “supplementary evidence about their provenance and purpose,” even as they are scrutinised with interest “as much for what they omit as for what they declaim” (Arnold and Blackburn 10). More importantly, even if authors of auto/biography endeavour to “pre-empt history” or “define it on their own terms,” they still remain subject to “ongoing social processes,” “popular reinterpretation” or to the “cultural accretions of generations” which will not be encased within a life as defined in a single book (12).

Varying perspectives on a single subject bring to the fore, the role of the narrator and reader in auto/biographical writing: a role that propels any author and reader of the text, to represent/construct a coherent subjectivity for, and understanding of, the central character in the narrative, who is “a unique emergent colo[u]red by [the author’s] biographical particularity and her active exercise of empathy” (Long 4). Each telling, and each reading of an auto/biographical narrative, then, throws up shifting identities, multiple subjectivities, and new attempts at breaking up and piecing together what otherwise appears to be immutable truth based in fact. Evans says that in the manner that authors of biographies “impose (or attempt to impose) order on the lives of the subjects,” authors of autobiographies run the risk of becoming “prisoners...in the presentation of their lives,” held hostage by “over-determined, and over-determining forces” that compel their narratives into specific structures in order to maintain the illusion of subject coherence (14). She goes on to state that a constant emphasis on chronological storytelling has driven auto/biographers in much of the twentieth century to refine the “possibility of the emotional lives and motivations of their subjects” and, therefore, fit the life of the subject to the “external expectations and the known realities” (82). In the process, any auto/biographical narrative has an “implicit structure” which “organises” narrative content in a way that can “marginalise or ignore significant aspects of individual experience” (81). The life-history approach, then, is a means “of breaking the silence imposed by society and history” (Arnold and Blackburn 6).

Here, we come to the second lens through which we examine the subjects of this study, i.e., feminism; because gender constitutes a vital marker along which auto/biographical literature can be investigated. More importantly, the principal subject of scrutiny in this study is a woman; one who was raised, and lived all her life, within profoundly patriarchal and patrilineal familial and social structures and beliefs. Such patriarchy, or the “power
relationships by which men dominate women” in systems whereby women are rendered “subordinate,” is disseminated through a variety of institutions like the family and social relations, schools, places of work, religion, law, political systems and the media (Bhasin 1). Patriarchy operates in different ways on women in “different classes in the same society; in different societies, and in different periods in history” (5). According to Simone de Beauvoir, it is a system in which “humanity is male,” and where “man defines woman not in herself” but “as relative to him,” crippling any notion that she is indeed an “autonomous being” (de Beauvoir xxii). In the process, she is rendered “incidental” and “inessential,” while he is the “Subject” and the “Absolute,” leaving her to, in individual and systemic ways, remain the “Other” (xxii). Further, because her anatomical make-up involves ovaries and a uterus, she is imprisoned “in her subjectivity,” circumscribed “within the limits of her own nature,” and doomed in popular belief to the position of someone who “thinks with her glands” (xxi).

In her seminal treatise, Sexual Politics, Kate Millett argues that in order to control the vital functions of “reproduction and socialisation of the young,” the patriarchal family insists upon “legitimacy,” decreeing that “no child should be brought into the world without a man” (Millett 35). In the process, it ensures that women and children are compelled to rely not only on a man’s “social status,” but also his “economic power,” reinforcing the position of the “masculine figure” within and outside the family (35). Such marginalisation is exacerbated in the Indian context, where women are oppressed at the intersection of caste, class and gender. In their essay, “An Overview of the Status of Women in India,” Neera Desai and Maithreyi Krishnaraj state that across most upper caste Hindu communities in the country, there has been a pervasive belief, historically, that the “salvation and happiness of women revolve around their virtue and chastity as daughters, wives and widows” (Desai and Krishnaraj 300). While the man, in such communities, is the “lord, master, owner and provider,” the woman of the family is a “commodity” or “possession” with no economic or social agency (300). Further, an upper caste Indian woman must perform a large number of “calendrical rites” for the general prosperity and health of the (male) members of the family, subtly yet surely reinforcing her role as “devout wife and doting mother” (300). This ideology is buttressed by a pantheon of “ideal women” in Indian mythology, from Sita and Savitri to Draupadi and Damayanti, who are constantly upheld as paragons of feminine virtue, as “dutiful, truthful, chaste, self-sacrificing women” of “unswerving wifely devotion whatever the temptation” (300).

Such devotion to the husband, in Suma Chitnis’s view, is “particularly idealised and firmly institutionalised” in the Hindu concept of “pativrata” – or “one who is vowed to her husband”, which is “romanticised through legend, folklore and folksong” in addition to ceremonies of various kinds (Chitnis 20). The “disadvantaged status of women,” is
evidenced in “the low level of their literacy” as also “their poor representation in the [country’s] workforce” (18). India’s long tryst with British imperialism witnessed the rise of the nationalist movement as well as the Social Reform Movement, both of which espoused the cause of liberalism and also, for the first time, raised the question of equal status of women in Indian society in the nineteenth century. This reform movement, though not explicitly mentioned in the texts included in our study, offers an interesting lens through which to understand the socio-cultural milieu within which the subject’s life played out. Social reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Mahadev Govind Ranade, Jyotirao Phule, among others, believed that social evils such as sati, the ill-treatment of women, child marriage, denial of property rights and education to women “could be eradicated” by “raising consciousness and making people sensitive to the injustice perpetrated on women” (Desai and Krishnaraj 310). The nationalist and Social Reform movements also, however, in a bid to make women appear “socially useful” in popular discourse, focussed on the “archetypal mother figure” which evoked “deep, often atavistic, images through the use of metaphor and symbol” (Kumar 2). This symbolic use of the mother “as a rallying device” ranged from feminist assertions of women’s power as “mothers of the nation” to “terrorist invocations” of the “protective and ravening mother goddess,” and finally to the “Gandhian lauding of the spirit of endurance and suffering embodied in the mother” (2).

However, Gandhi’s “self-feminisation” and his “feminisation of politics” has been criticised by feminists like Radha Kumar, as emphasising, at all times, “the ennobling qualities of motherhood,” which “sought explicitly to curb or subdue the most fearsome aspects of femininity, which lie in erotic and tactile domains” (Kumar 2). The “new woman” constructed in the process of such reformism, argues Partha Chatterjee, was different from her predecessors purely as a result of “social policies pursued by men,” which in turn calls to question her agency in shaping such a change (Chatterjee 135). He does contend, however, that “dominance” in any form “cannot exhaust the claims of subjectivity;” if anything “the dominated must retain an aspect of autonomy,” failing which “power would cease to be a relation” and “would no longer be constituted by struggle” (137). It is this struggle between dominance and autonomy in the representation/construction of the female subject in auto/biography as a literary narrative that this study seeks to uncover through an analysis of the concerned texts, discussed in some detail in the next section of this chapter. In her book, *Telling Women’s Lives: Subject/Narrator/Reader/Text*, Judy Long discusses the role that gender plays in shaping “the subject’s narrative and the narrator’s text,” as also colouring “the reading and interpretation of the narrative” (9). Men and women writers inject their gender subjectivities into the auto/biographical texts they produce, even as they seek to articulate the gender positions of their subjects as entities operating within specific
socio-economic and cultural frameworks. When one reads for gender, according to Long, one understands how women are located in society and history. More importantly, she underscores the idea that “[a]s a muted social group, women’s collective experience is understated or omitted in official representations, recognised identities and traditions of their society” (9).

Describing the traditional auto/biographical canon as profoundly androcentric, Long calls to question “the universalising dynamic” that “cements a link among the male subject, male culture, and patriarchy” (17). This also foregrounds the tradition where men have been endowed with an entitlement and legitimacy that allows them institutionalised entry into the public sphere without any barriers, in a way that women have been historically marginalised in covert and overt ways. “In writing his life,” says Long, “the male subject can simultaneously position himself in history and lay claim to a public heritage” (19). In contrast, women writers and subjects have been consistently edged out of a decidedly masculinist literary space. In their preface to Women Writing in India, Volume I, Susie Tharu and K. Lalita foreground an important reality when they examine what it must have been like for a woman writer “to live in times and in situations where she was doubly “Other” – as woman and as colonised person – even in her own vision” (xix). Long sees women’s lives as typified by “dailiness” (45). And this dailiness, she says, is given adequate representation in women’s autobiographies which “[embrace] the web of relationships in which women are embedded and the fabric of daily tasks”, while also reflecting the “episodic experience of work and relationships, the lack of closure, and the nonlinear experience of time that characterise women’s daily life” (45-46). Such domesticity has a distinctly repetitive quality, most likely to be marginalised in narratives that privilege perceptible emotional, psychological, intellectual, material, and spiritual growth playing out against a sweeping canvas of social, economic and political change. It does, however, in Long’s view, “[involve] discipline, insight, persistence, expert timing, risk-taking, and opportunity cost” (50). It calls for both “skill and motivation,” and above all, it takes “time and strategy” (50).

Another crucial element in this investigation is the mining of similarities and differences in the way that Kasturba has been interpreted/ represented/ constructed by different auto/biographers. We do have to recognise, however, that these interpretations might have “very little to do with the ‘truth’ per se,” and much more to do with the “prevailing moral discourses and perceptions of the acceptable extent of the disclosure” (Evans 84). Within those limitations, this study attempts, what Evans calls, a “reclamation of the past” from the perspective of someone “outside the circle of great and good,” and in so doing, offers a “reinterpretation of history” which can serve to “empower the present” (Evans 6). In her essay, “Is There Life in the Contact Zone? Auto/Biographical Practices and the Field of
Representation in Writing Past Lives,” Liz Stanley argues for a ‘feminist auto/biography,’ by which she refers to an epistemologically-oriented concern with the “intellectual and other ramifications of the shifting boundaries between the self and the other, present and past, writing and reading, fact and fiction, within the oral, visual and written texts that are ‘biographies’ and ‘autobiographies’…” (Stanley 4). She further states that feminist auto/biography displaces “the referential and foundational claims of writers and researchers, unsettles notions of ‘science’, problemati[s]es the ‘expert’ claims of research, and questions power issues most researchers silence or disclaim” (4). As Susan Ware puts it, “because the contours of women’s lives [are] often different from those of men, the format and goals of biography [have] to be rethought” taking away from the traditional “male plot,” which does not work.

It is through the dismantling of this androcentric canon, and foraging through its debris, that one can identify new and significant ways in which women can express themselves in idioms that embrace their multiple subjectivities. In the absence of facts on her childhood and background, and equally vital details of her life during periods of separation from her husband, any coherent and conclusive narrative on Kasturba is rendered untenable. Thus far she remains a project steered and controlled by a deeply patriarchal auto/biographical discourse generated by men and women alike. However, revisiting Gandhi’s autobiography, as also biographies on Kasturba and the Mahatma, serves as a starting point in the direction of such a feminist biography, allowing us to examine more closely, the patriarchal fault lines that underlie representations of Kasturba in popular auto/biographical literature. It will also enable us to penetrate the silences that shroud Kasturba’s portrayal as a ‘real’ woman, one with a distinctive claim to her own identity and personality, and not just as an appended ‘Ba’ to Gandhi’s ‘Bapu’ in India’s chauvinistic nationalist consciousness. It is also our hope that the findings of this study may offer fellow scholars looking to present revisionist biographical narratives on Kasturba Gandhi, a concrete foundation on which to de-construct existing images and ideas on Kasturba and re-construct them with greater diligence and honesty.

1.3 AN OVERVIEW OF THE TEXTS ANALYSED IN THE STUDY

Rajmohan Gandhi, *The Forgotten Woman: The Story of Kastur Gandhi, Wife of Mahatma Gandhi* (1998) by Arun and Sunanda Gandhi, and *Gandhi before India* (2014) by Ramachandra Guha. With the exception of Gandhi’s autobiography, which originally appeared in serialised form in his Gujarati journal, *Navajivan*, from 1925 to 1929, and was translated “almost concurrently” into English by his long term associate and secretary, Mahadev Desai; all the biographies in this study have been produced originally in English (Chandrahas 1). Owing to the linguistic constraints of the investigator undertaking this study, the choice of primary texts has been determined (and, in the process, limited) by this factor. Another key limitation of the study is that its selection of auto/biographical material also excludes numerous other biographies on Gandhi in English and other languages, as also other material published by Gandhi and other scholars in the form of letters, pamphlets and books, restricting its findings to those texts selected for scrutiny.

In the Translator’s Preface to Gandhi’s autobiography, Mahadev Desai says that the first edition of *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* was published in two volumes; the first came out in 1927, and the second followed in 1929 (Gandhi viii). This translation, however, Desai points out, had the “benefit of Gandhiji’s revision,” and therefore his imprimatur, as it appeared serially in *Young India*. Gandhi himself dedicated his personal life to the service of his political and spiritual agenda, systematically employing his body and mind in pursuit of what he called his “numerous experiments with truth” (ix). He claims that he began documenting his personal life at “the instance of some of my nearest and dearest co-workers” (ix). Gandhi also makes it clear, in the introductory chapter to the text, that his life “consists of nothing but those experiments” and that he should not mind “if every page of it speaks only of my experiments” (ix). His autobiographical account, however, can also be viewed as the putting down on paper of what he perceives to be his emotional, intellectual and spiritual legacy, one that enables readers in the generations to come to understand and appreciate a distinguished life playing out against a watershed in modern history. And yet, it does not follow the conventions of the genre of auto/biography, choosing instead to be a “spartan, goal-directed” narrative, driven by Gandhi’s “impatience with inessentials” (Chandrahas 1). What it does offer, then, is a wealth of “lessons and maxims” and “speculations about root causes and deep connections,” and, in equal measure, an “infectious moral restlessness and urgency” (1).

It is this relentless, and often whimsical, quest for what Gandhi calls “the Absolute Truth, the Eternal Principle, that is God,” that forms the basis of his autobiography, a pursuit for which he is prepared “to sacrifice the things dearest to me,” including his life (Gandhi xi). Gandhi’s autobiography spans the period from his birth in 1869 all the way to 1920 by which time he had gained a firm foothold as a leader to reckon with in the Indian National
Congress. As a result, it does not offer glimpses into Kasturba’s personality or her world over the final twenty-two years of their marriage up until her demise in 1944. *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, however, is central to this study, because, of all the individuals who have attempted to represent/construct Kasturba through the creation of auto/biographical texts, it is Gandhi’s voice that ostensibly bears the greatest authenticity by virtue of his intimate and lifelong relationship with the subject. Borne of such profoundly personal knowledge of, and shared experiences with, Kasturba, Gandhi’s autobiography, to that extent, becomes a primary text or ‘master-narrative’ that several other biographers in English have mined in good measure in an attempt to understand the minutiae of Gandhi’s life, as also his personal relationships, especially his equation with his wife of 62 years. The text, then, can be viewed as a literary palimpsest, through its writing in Gujarati followed by its translation into several languages, with various biographers and critics reading into, and thereby writing over, its original content through the infusion of their own subjectivities and scholarly perspectives into Gandhi’s first person account.

Two of Gandhi’s most celebrated biographies chosen for this study, *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, and *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, have been written by an American and English scholar respectively. The others have been written by Indians, of whom two have the distinction of being grandsons of the Gandhis; yet another was a personal physician and close aide of Gandhi and Kasturba; and the last, a well-known chronicler of India’s modern history. Louis Fischer visited Gandhi in the Sevagram Ashram in the summer of 1942, detailing the interaction between biographer and subject in a chapter titled “My Week with Gandhi,” in *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*; following a regimen each day of “an hour’s interview with Gandhi,” along with “the opportunity for conversation over meals,” in addition to which Fischer “walked with him once or twice a day” (Fischer 459). This is important, because, with the exception of Sushila Nayyar who had a long and affectionate relationship with Gandhi and Kasturba, Fischer is the only biographer among those in this study, to have met and interviewed the Mahatma at some length for the purpose of documenting his life. Besides this brief contact with Gandhi, during which he also had the opportunity to observe, if not interact with, Kasturba, Fischer brings his journalistic and academic training to bear on what is widely acknowledged as a comprehensive biography of Gandhi. The book traces the subject’s life from birth, childhood and adolescence in Porbandar and Rajkot, to his law education in England, his brief and unsuccessful stint as a lawyer in India, followed by over two decades of legal and social work in South Africa, his return to India to embrace a life of poverty, public service and nationalist politics in India’s fight for independence against the British, and culminating in his assassination in 1948.
Rajmohan Gandhi, Kasturba and Gandhi’s grandson through their youngest son, Devadas, was twelve-and-a-half, a “schoolboy in New Delhi” when his grandfather was shot to death, and only eight-and-a-half when he lost his grandmother (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas xii). In his preface to The Good Boatman: A Portrait of Gandhi, the author refers to the Mahatma as both “a wonder and a weight” since the former’s childhood (Rajmohan Gandhi, The Good Boatman, ix). Although related to the Gandhis by blood, Rajmohan Gandhi’s personal interaction with Kasturba and Gandhi was curtailed by their demise in the early years of his life, a fact, he believes, was compounded by his desire to capture “the story of someone who was neither simple to live with, nor a stranger to error or to defeat, but who continues to inspire many and interest many more” in the capacity of a “scholar committed to facts and their discovery” (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, xi, xii). He therefore arrives at a coherent image of his grandfather through “a mass of material: letters, memoirs, diary jottings, records of conversations, talks, interviews, articles, books” and other critical material available on the Mahatma. He also states that The Good Boatman, the first of his endeavours to “answer some important questions” in Gandhi’s life as a political and spiritual leader to the nation, is “not a biography,” by virtue of its general structure that poses inquiries into Gandhi’s world in the context of specific themes; while Mohandas: A True Story of a Man, His People and an Empire is definitively a biography in content and structure (ix). Both books, however, lend themselves to discourse analysis, because they attempt to highlight, among other aspects of Gandhi’s life, what he was like “in his relationships with parents, wife and sons, with women in general and with his young female associates” even as they explore his equations with “political and non-political colleagues” (x).

Ramachandra Guha’s Gandhi before India is organised as a two-volume biography, of which only the first volume has been published so far. This first book, in Guha’s words, “examines [Gandhi’s] upbringing in his native Gujarat, his two years as a student in London and, most intensively, his two decades as a lawyer, home-maker and community organiser in South Africa” (Guha 6). The emphasis on the latter chapter in the Mahatma’s life, which typically finds truncated representation in other Gandhi biographies, owing to the “twin temptations” of “[h]aste and teleology,” according to Guha, is essential to the understanding of Gandhi as a “social reformer, popular leader, political thinker and family man,” because Gandhi was “fundamentally shaped by his South African experience” (8). This book is also vital to the study at hand, because, in addition to being the latest in a long line of biographies on Gandhi, it focuses on his formative years – both professionally and spiritually. Further, it offers new insights into Gandhi’s relationship with Kasturba at a crucial juncture in the couple’s individual and social development, as also life in Gandhi’s earliest conceptions of communal existence in the Phoenix Settlement and Tolstoy Farm. It is a book that seeks to “illuminate” the “personal Gandhi” inasmuch as it hopes to shed light on the
“political Gandhi” during a time when he was “taken out” of a “conservative, static world” into a country “still in the process of being made” (10, 11). Interestingly, Guha compares Gandhi’s trajectory with that of the mythical god, Ram, who also “travels long distances” and “spends long periods in exile,” in the company of a “loyal and very supportive wife,” whom he “does not always treat with the respect and understanding she deserves” (7).

In what is, perhaps, the only comprehensive English language biography available on Kasturba Gandhi, *The Forgotten Woman: The Untold Story of Kastur Gandhi, Wife of Mahatma Gandhi*, we come to, what could be classified as, the most important text in this study. Written by her grandson, Arun, through the second son of the Gandhis, Manilal, with assistance from his wife, Sunanda, this narrative ostensibly presents the life history of the Gandhis through the perspective of Kasturba. Arun Gandhi, like his paternal cousin, Rajmohan, admits to meeting his grandmother for the last time in 1939, when he was only five years old, owing to the fact that his father had chosen to live in South Africa to continue Gandhi’s work towards “nonviolent social and political change” (Arun Gandhi 1). In the introduction to the book, he likens his legendary grandfather to a banyan tree, whose stature “dwarfed everyone else” (1). Arun Gandhi also claims that he was compelled to write this biography to combat the image of his grandmother as “an ever bumbling fool who had no idea what her husband was trying to achieve,” and also to assert the idea that Kasturba made monumental personal sacrifices “not simply because grandfather wanted her to but because she was convinced it was the right way” (2). The narrative structure of this book is also significantly different from most of the other books in this study, in the way that the authors set aside traditional academic scholarship, almost native to the form of life history. They choose to focus, instead, on the inner life of Kasturba, particularly in her younger days, and also attempt to recreate incidents and private, often undocumented, conversations between husband and wife. This format of storytelling throws up its own sets of challenges in assessing the representation/construction of the principal subject of our study, as also the indistinct sources tapped for this purpose, which we will discuss through a close reading of the text in the coming chapters.

In addition to the male writers mentioned above, we have chosen to analyse the biographical output of two women writers, for the purposes of this study, namely Judith Brown and Sushila Nayyar. This enables us to scrutinise the ways in which men and women authors approach the same subjects, i.e., Gandhi and Kasturba, through different points-of-view by virtue of their gender. An English historian from Oxford, Judith M. Brown’s *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* has been written almost exclusively as a political biography of the man with scant interest in the details of his personal life. Her biography of Gandhi, she says, “flows from [her] personal interest in and connection with India,” owing to her birth and
early childhood in the country “in the final years of the raj;” an interest that grew with “frequent return visits” both for pleasure and “professional research as an academic historian” (Brown 2). The book explores, in Pavan K. Varma’s view, “the inner dilemmas of a leader, not always victorious - as those who have put him on a pedestal tend to believe - but often in deep gloom; not always declaratory and triumphant, but often in contemplative retreat” (Varma 1). Brown attempts to break through what she calls “the hagiography of the early historians of Indian nationalism” and discuss, instead, Gandhi as an “ingenious and sensitive artist in symbols,” one whose “particular genius” marked the nationalist movement, and “gave it a character unlike that of any anti-imperial nationalism of the century” even if India’s freedom could have been achieved without him (Brown 385). And in the crafting of Gandhi’s life history against a sweeping canvas of political change, Brown’s interest in, and attitude towards, Kasturba deserves special attention.

Sushila Nayyar’s slender memoir, Kasturba: Wife of Gandhi, offers a contrast to Judith Brown’s all-encompassing view of Gandhi against Indian nationalist politics, written instead as a short and intimate memoir describing her interaction with Kasturba Gandhi over two decades from December 1920 when she first encountered Kasturba and Gandhi all the way to Kasturba’s demise in February 1944. As the younger sister of Pyarelal, Gandhi’s trusted aide and secretary, Nayyar was an active participant in Gandhi’s Satyagraha movement, and eventually worked “tirelessly to bring peace and communal harmony during the turbulent period of the Partition of the country” (Thakkar and Mehta 303). Having spent time in Sabarmati Ashram as a youngster, she developed a personal bond with the principal subject of her memoir – a bond which enables her to articulate with fluency and affection her observations on Kasturba, emphasising her “stature in the national movement,” her “bonds to her sons and their children,” including a “wonderfully moving account of her last illness, and her wish to have, close to her, their long estranged son Harilal,” even as Nayyar details Kasturba’s last prolonged illness during their incarceration in Pune’s Aga Khan Palace (Guha 1). The memoir comes with an introduction by Gandhi himself, referring to Kasturba’s popularity in the public imagination owing to “her ability to lose herself in me,” further describing her as someone “who had no interest in staying with me except to help me with my work,” an idea that bears detailed analysis through the course of this study (Nayyar 9). Brown and Nayyar bring distinctly different sensibilities to bear on their understanding and expression of the principal subjects of their respective enquiry, which a close reading of their work will illustrate in the following chapters.

This study also profits from supplementary reading in the form of texts like Ba and Bapu, by Mukul Kalarthi; Mr. Gandhi: The Man, by Millie Graham Polak; Bapu – My Mother, by Manu Gandhi, and Understanding Gandhi: Gandhians in Conversation with Fred J. Blum, edited by Usha Thakkar and Jayashree Mehta, all of which serve as valuable secondary sources in
uncovering representations/ constructions of Kasturba and Gandhi in popular discourse.

1.4 CHAPTER SCHEMA OF THE STUDY

The forthcoming chapters of the study are roughly schematised to scrutinise representations of Kasturba Gandhi in auto/biographical narratives as follows:

**Chapter II** focuses on the ways in which Kasturba has been ‘imagined’ inasmuch as she has been represented in the auto/biographical texts under examination in this study. It begins with an examination of the paucity of facts available on Kasturba, as a result of which we have to construct her persona based on information made available to us by Gandhi and other biographers in this study. It will also highlight the subjective nature of physical descriptions of Kasturba by Gandhi and the other biographers. This chapter further suggests that Kasturba’s identity has been fashioned by a popular and deeply patriarchal nationalist consciousness, appending her persona almost exclusively to that of her husband, falling back on gender stereotypes that limit her persona to that of a wife and mother; it also examines the ways in which Kasturba’s lack of formal education has rendered her voiceless in the presentation of her own narrative, unlike her husband who is a ubiquitous presence in India’s collective imagination.

**Chapter III** focuses exclusively on the domestic universe of the Gandhis. It studies representations of their trajectory from the early years of their marriage in Rajkot, Gujarat, as young members of a large traditional joint family, to their decades in South Africa raising four sons amidst an unconventional and peripatetic lifestyle eventually culminating in communal living at the Phoenix Settlement and the Tolstoy Farm; it then follows them through the Kochrab, Sabarmati and Sevagram ashrams in India, all the way to Kasturba’s final incarceration in the Aga Khan Palace in Pune along with her husband. In the process, this chapter will focus on the power dynamic in operation in the Gandhi household, the division of labour within these domestic establishments, and also the changing relationship between Kasturba and Gandhi as described by the Mahatma and the other biographers under scrutiny in this study.

**Chapter IV** explores in detail the ways in which Kasturba’s personality is represented/ constructed by Gandhi and the other biographers under consideration for this study, through a close reading of relevant passages from the texts with respect to five specific incidents, in which she is commonly acknowledged as a key actor. These include the fight between Gandhi and Kasturba over the cleaning of the chamber pot in their Durban house...
in 1898, Kasturba’s argument with her husband over the returning of expensive gifts given to them by members of the Indian community in Durban in 1901, Kasturba’s contribution towards Gandhi’s to start consuming goat’s milk following a serious illness in 1918, the couple’s encounter with their oldest son, Harilal, at the Katni station in Orissa around 1936, and the uproar surrounding Kasturba’s entering the Puri Jagannath Temple in 1938. Through this we excavate the multiple subjectivities that emerge in the representation/construction of Kasturba, as each biographer imposes his/her own individual perspective on the incident at hand, in the process injecting his/her subjective proclivities into the rendering of the principal subject of this study.
CHAPTER II
A WOMAN IMAGINED:
EXAMINING KASTURBA’S PRESENCE/ABSENCE IN THE
AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL TEXTS

2.1 AN EXAMINATION OF THE ‘FACTS’ AVAILABLE ON KASTURBA

2.1.1 Childhood and Early Marriage (1869—1896)

Before we begin an analysis of representations of our principal subject in the auto/biographical discourse under scrutiny, it is only right that we outline what has been presented to us as the basic ‘facts’ on Kasturba, which find corroboration in at least two source texts through the course of our primary reading. This will enable us to identify, with some clarity, the narrative areas in which she is distinctly visible, and those in which she has been rendered absent/invisible by Gandhi and the other biographers. This section will revisit, therefore, the details of Kasturba’s life in chronological order, beginning with her first appearance in the life histories of and by Gandhi, as a teenager whom he married in Porbandar, all the way to her demise as an incarcerated nationalist septuagenarian over six decades later. Arun Gandhi’s biography of Kasturba, The Forgotten Woman: The Untold Story of Kastur Gandhi, Wife of Mahatma Gandhi, claims that his grandmother’s family records as well as the government records of births and deaths were “washed away in floods that ravaged Porbandar at the turn of the century,” leading to a paucity of documentary evidence and information on her background (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 3). Further, Kasturba’s parents and brother “died young” and left “no written record of the family history” except for “the references in [Gandhi]’s writings to the Makanji family and Ba” (3). Arun Gandhi’s research on Kasturba, especially that of her early life and youth, to that extent, is hinged on “oral history,” in the form of “interviews with scores of people from all walks of life who knew [Kasturba] and had lived and worked with her” (3). These ‘scores’ of interviewees, however, remain largely unnamed, and often without mention, throughout his biography of his grandmother.

More importantly, it is through, what he calls, “a review of what happened to Kastur [as she was called in childhood] in this period of young life” and “a consideration of the setting in which those events occurred” that he has made “certain assumptions” about his grandmother, which render Arun Gandhi’s presentation of numerous details in Kasturba’s life, despite his best intentions, largely untenable (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 9). While the
biographer claims that there is no record of the exact day of Kasturba’s birth, it is widely accepted that she was born on April 11, 1869, a few months before her husband, Mohandas, who was born on October 2, in the city of Porbandar in Gujarat’s Kathiawar district (Routray 1). She was raised as “the only daughter and the middle child of wealthy and indulgent parents – Gokaldas and Vrajkunwerba Kapadia” hailing from the Modh Vania community (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 5). Her father was a “leading citizen” and “one-time mayor” of Porbandar in British India, having inherited a “trading house dealing in cloth, grain and cotton shipments to Africa and what was then known as Arabia,” which he expanded during his lifetime adding considerably to the family fortune (5). Kastur grew up in a modest but “well appointed” and “handsomely furnished” house, and was schooled in “the art of being a good wife, mother and housekeeper” from early on (6, 7). At the age of seven, she was betrothed to her neighbour, Mohandas Gandhi, the son of Putliba and Karamchand Gandhi, who served as the dewan or Prime Minister to the Rana of Porbandar, “sometime in the year 1876” (8). Kasturba and Mohandas, both aged 13, were wed in a “triple marriage ceremony,” along with Mohandas’s older brother, Karsandas who wed Ganga, and his cousin, Motilal, who married Harkunwar (11, 12). In Gandhi before India, Ramachandra Guha says that the precise day or year of their marriage is disputed, with “most accounts” pointing to 1883, and a few others indicating that it occurred in 1882 or 1881 (Guha 28).

Kasturba finds mention for the first time in Gandhi’s autobiography, The Story of My Experiments with Truth, in a chapter entitled “Child Marriage,” where the adolescent couple met for the first time on the “wedding dais,” performing the ritual of the “Saptapadi;” and as “newly wedded husband and wife,” who put “the sweet Kansar into each other’s mouth” following which, they “began to live together” (M. K. Gandhi 9). We are offered no details of her family or childhood prior to their marriage by Gandhi. After marriage, dictated by tradition, Kastur accompanied her husband’s family to Rajkot, where Karamchand Gandhi was posted as dewan. As was the case with child marriages of that time, where “the child-wife spends more than half her time at her father’s place,” Gandhi says that the young couple “could not have lived together longer than an aggregate period of three years” over the first five years of their marriage (12). By the time Kasturbai was sixteen, she was pregnant with their first child which died within a few days of its birth, soon after the death of Karamchand Gandhi (Guha 29). She gave birth to Harilal, the couple’s oldest son, in 1888 around the time that Mohandas began making plans to go to England to train as a barrister in law (Rajmohan Gandhi 22). Soon after Harilal’s birth, Mohandas travelled from Rajkot to Bombay and thence to London, “leaving my wife and baby of a few months” (M. K. Gandhi 34). Over the next two years we find no mention of Kasturba in Gandhi’s autobiography,
which focusses on his experiments with vegetarianism, social etiquette, and religious enquiry as he pursues a degree in law.

Arun Gandhi’s biography of Kasturba points to her growing “ever more conscious” in her husband’s absence, of “substantial changes in the Gandhi family’s financial circumstances” following the death of her father-in-law, with her brothers-in-law finding it difficult “to earn the money needed to maintain the household in accustomed comfort” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 41). In the spring of 1891, her mother-in-law, Putliba Gandhi took ill, and “[w]ithin days, she was dead” (47). Over a month later, Mohandas, having been called to the bar in England, boarded a ship, which reached Bombay in a few weeks, where he was informed by his brother of his mother’s demise, much to his immense grief. There is “no suggestion” in his autobiography, according to Rajmohan Gandhi, of “an ecstatic reunion with Kastur” upon his return (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 54). We are not told about Kasturba’s life following Gandhi’s homecoming, except in small measure with regard to Mohandas’s “squeamishness and suspiciousness in respect of every little thing” as also to the “food reform” that the London-returned barrister insisted on imposing on his family members, which will be dealt with in some detail in the next chapter (M. K. Gandhi 76, 77). We do know, however, that she was separated once again from her husband within a few months, when failing to build a career in law in Rajkot, Gandhi attempted to earn a livelihood in Bombay, living in the metropolis “off and on” from November 1891 to September 1892 (Guha 61). During this time, Kasturba was pregnant again, and gave birth to their second son, Manilal, on October 28, 1892 (63). Upon his return to Rajkot, Mohandas was tired of dealing with he calls a “poisonous” atmosphere for work in Rajkot, and accepted an offer from Dada Abdulla and Co., a “Meman firm from Porbandar” to “instruct [their] counsel” in South Africa on a “big case” for a year (M. K. Gandhi 84, 85.) Kasturba was left behind with her in-laws and her two sons, as her husband sailed out to Durban from Bombay in April 1893 (Rajmohan Gandhi 62).

2.1.2 Life in Durban and Return to India (1897—1904)

The first three years of Gandhi’s life in Natal combating apartheid, and fighting against the Immigration Law Amendment Bill and the £3 tax on non-indentured Indians, have been documented in great detail in his autobiography, as also by biographies on him. Kasturba’s life in Rajkot, during the same period is shrouded in silence. In Mohandas: A True Story of a Man, his People and an Empire, Rajmohan Gandhi suggests that she “could not have had an easy time” in Mohandas’s absence (Rajmohan Gandhi 85). She had to fulfil her duty as the “wife of a younger brother,” playing the role of “the ‘junior’ housekeeper in a joint family”
with several children including Harilal and Manilal, and “lots of chores” (85). Following the amicable settlement of the case between Dada Abdulla and his cousin, he was planning to return to India; however, “a farewell party for him” turned into a “planning session for a political campaign,” and “it was not for three years” that Gandhi was able to come back home (Brown 34). Gandhi returned in the middle of 1896, but soon travelled with his “Green Pamphlet” describing the condition of Indians in South Africa, to Calcutta, Bombay, Poona, and Madras. Guha says that Gandhi’s impressions of his sons, then eight and three, are “unrecorded,” even as we have no concrete sense of “what relations he resumed with their mother, his wife” (Guha 102). What we do know is that Kasturba, Harilal and Manilal, along with Gokaldas, Gandhi’s sister’s son, accompanied Gandhi back to Durban on November 30 of the same year, aboard the SS Courland owned by Dada Abdulla. Following a “turbulent start” upon their arrival in Durban, where an enraged mob of white South Africans attacked her barrister husband, which was Kasturba’s first encounter with Gandhi’s public work and image in South Africa, she and her children were initially put up in the house of Gandhi’s friend, Parsee Rustomjee, following which the family settled down in the sprawling house in Beach Grove (Rajmohan Gandhi 90). Guha says that while we know that Kasturba Gandhi had their third son, Ramdas, in 1898 and the fourth, Devadas, in 1900, there is precious little material available that offers “contemporary accounts of [Gandhi’s] familial situation” during this period (Guha 138). Consequently, the biographer is compelled to rely on “the patriarch’s recollections and our own speculations” (138).

It was in Durban that Kasturba had the experience of cohabiting with Gandhi’s colleagues, “who often stayed with [the family]” for long periods, including “Hindus and Christians, or to describe them by their provinces, Gujaratis and Tahitians” (M. K. Gandhi 231). Two key, and well documented incidents which occurred in the Beach Grove villa during this period, namely the row between Gandhi and Kasturba over the cleaning of a colleague’s chamber pot, and also a quarrel between the couple over the farewell gifts given to them by the Indian community upon their decision to return to India, will be discussed at length through a close reading of the incidents as represented by Gandhi and the other biographers under scrutiny in Chapter IV of this study. After five years in South Africa, during which Gandhi had organised an ambulance corps to offer medical aid to the British soldiers fighting in the Anglo-Boer War in 1899, the Gandhis sailed back to India via Mauritius reaching Bombay in “the last week of November 1901” (145). Gandhi, however, left for Calcutta to attend the seventeenth session of the Indian National Congress “[a]fter settling Kasturba and the children in Rajkot” (145). Arun Gandhi says that the return to India proved “turbulent” for Kasturba (Arun Gandhi 100). “For days on end,” he says, “she was busy receiving callers, attending parties, recounting her adventures on the high seas and in faraway South Africa” (100). Amidst this merriment, however, he believes she was “mourning a great loss” – that
of her parents during her absence from India. While, once again, “there are no records to refer to, no correspondence to examine, and few reminiscences to rely on,” he says that “Gokaldas and Vrajkunwerba Kapadia seem to have disappeared from their daughter’s life” after her departure to South Africa in 1896 (100-1). Gandhi returned to Rajkot the following February, and tried to establish a law practice in the city, but with little success (Guha 148).

Soon, on the urging of a family friend, Gandhi took Kasturba and the children and moved from Rajkot to Bombay in July 1902, “to make one more attempt at establishing himself in the High Court” (149). Gandhi rented chambers “in the offices of Payne Gilbert and Sayani” in the Fort area, and also a house in Girgaum, where the family lived for a few months (Rajmohan Gandhi 100). When their second son, Manilal, suffered from a serious attack of typhoid and pneumonia, Gandhi decided that the Girgaum house “was not habitable,” and moved the family to a “fine bungalow” in Santa Cruz (M. K. Gandhi 208). However, invited back to South Africa by his Indian friends and colleagues, and driven by “the mundane facts of failure” in establishing himself professionally in Bombay, Gandhi sailed for Durban once again, with his nephews Maganlal and Anandlal in November 1902 (Guha 150,152). Kasturba and the children were left behind in the Santa Cruz flat in the care of Maganlal’s brother, Chhaganlal and his wife Kashiben; with their eldest son, Harilal, dispatched to a boarding school in Gondal (150). Describing the time in his autobiography, Gandhi says that “[w]hile separation from wife and children, the breaking up of a settled establishment, and the going from certain to uncertain” was momentarily “painful,” he had “inured” himself to “an uncertain life” (M. K. Gandhi 209). Yet again, we are left with next to no details of Kasturba’s life in the two years that Gandhi spent away from the family, first in Durban, and later in Johannesburg in the Transvaal where he “resumed his lucrative law practice” (Fischer 88). In Johannesburg, Gandhi lived “the life of an expatriate,” as he worked with his “Indian clients during the day” and spent his evenings with “(white) professionals likewise single or separated from their families” (Guha 173).

2.1.3 Later Years in South Africa and Participation in Satyagraha (1904—1914)

When Gandhi recognised that his return to India would be indefinitely delayed owing to his work for the struggle of his countrymen against racial prejudice, he called his family back to South Africa. Kasturba arrived with three of her children, along with Chhaganlal and Gokuldas “towards the end of 1904,” leaving behind her eldest son, Harilal, who was “keen to sit the Bombay Matriculation” (Guha 177). She settled down in “a two-storey house with a garden, in Johannesburg’s upscale Troyeville area” (Rajmohan Gandhi 112). There is a long passage in Arun Gandhi’s biography on Kasturba that describes her assistance to Gandhi during the Pneumonic Plague in the ‘coolie’ or ‘ghetto’ location in Johannesburg; of her
visiting “homes in the Indian location” to “talk to the women about basic health and hygiene measures, and explain how to detect plague symptoms,” as also her soliciting help from these women “to clean and scrub” the warehouse given for Gandhi’s relief operations by the Municipal Commission of Johannesburg, setting it up to serve as “a functioning hospital” (Arun Gandhi 119). However, Kasturba’s presence in Johannesburg during this time finds absolutely no corroboration in Gandhi’s autobiography or the other biographies examined in this study. The Gandhi family was soon joined in the Troyeville house by Henry Polak, “a thin, lean intellectually-minded Jew” from Britain, who shared Gandhi’s passion for vegetarianism, and would soon to grow to be one of the latter’s closest associates in South Africa (Guha 164). Polak married Millie Graham in a civil ceremony in Johannesburg with Gandhi as the best man, following which she joined the Gandhi household in early 1906, completing “its possibilities of accommodation” (Polak 12). Rajmohan Gandhi draws our attention to the possible discomfort that Kasturba might have experienced “at having to share her home and husband, soon after rejoining him, with a white couple,” but, as he is equally quick to point out, “we do not have her reactions” on this matter (Rajmohan Gandhi 113).

When Gandhi thought it necessary to form an Indian Ambulance Corps to nurse wounded African tribesmen in the Zulu rebellion in Natal in 1906, he “decided to break up the Johannesburg home,” sending Kasturba and the children to the Phoenix Settlement, a rural community he had set up near Durban inspired by ideas he had imbibed from John Ruskin’s Unto this Last (M. K. Gandhi 262). Phoenix also hoped “to bear a large part of the cost of a newspaper he founded and largely edited from 1904, Indian Opinion” (Brown 36). This dismantling of domesticity ostensibly had Kasturba’s “full consent,” and after settling his family at the community, Gandhi moved with Henry and Millie Polak into a smaller establishment in Johannesburg (M. K. Gandhi 262). Harilal Gandhi, who married Chanchal Gulab Vora in Rajkot in May of 1906, joined Kasturba and his brothers in Phoenix in August of that year. Gandhi travelled to London in order to lobby for the rights of Indians in South Africa from October to December of 1906, but Kasturba and her sons remained in Phoenix. The education of Gandhi’s sons was supervised during this period by Chhaganlal Gandhi, who stayed in regular touch with his uncle and mentor (Guha 230). Gandhi was arrested and tried on January 10, 1908, for deliberately disobeying an order to leave the Transvaal, as part of his passive resistance struggle against the harsh Asiatic Immigration Law Amendment Ordinance or the Black Act imposed in the colonies of South Africa and incarcerated in Fort Prison for two months (Guha 267). Later that year, he moved out of the house he shared with the Polaks, and began living with his German Jewish friend, Hermann Kallenbach (Guha 285). There is no mention of Kasturba through these years in most biographies under examination here. Presumably she was still living with the rest of the
community in Phoenix. In August of that year, Harilal, who had joined his father in his Satyagraha, was arrested and imprisoned for a month (Guha 297). Gandhi courted prison twice more: the first time he was sentenced to two months in Volksrust prison for re-entering the Transvaal without a legal permit under the new Transvaal Immigration Restriction Act which curbed the entry of Indians in the Transvaal provinces, in October 1908; and the second time in February of 1909, where he was kept “in a dark, narrow cell” in Pretoria (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 137-8).

In November of 1908, Kasturba took “seriously ill” in Phoenix, but despite Albert West’s plea to Gandhi to seek parole or pay a penalty in order to join his wife, Gandhi wrote Kasturba a “tender yet hard letter” telling her that the “satyagraha prevented him from joining her” (138). In January of 1909, suffering from “frequent haemorrhage,” she underwent surgery in Durban “without chloroform” owing to her “extremely emaciated condition” (M. K. Gandhi 269). She returned to Phoenix a few days later, and improved under Gandhi’s “hydropathic treatment” (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 138). Gandhi visited London once again, for four and a half months, in the middle of 1909. In 1910, as the Satyagraha movement gained momentum, and numerous Indians were either jailed or deported, Gandhi and Kallenbach set up the Tolstoy Farm, “twenty-one miles from Johannesburg,” where “Indian satyagrahis of all religious and social backgrounds, and their families, could live together and support one another” (155). In July of the same year, Kasturba moved from Phoenix to the Tolstoy Farm; she was preceded by her sons and husband earlier in that year (Guha 395). The Gandhi “family unit” had been briefly “restored” after five long years, during which “the father had been mostly in Johannesburg, the mother wholly in Phoenix, and the sons shuttling between” (395). However, the relationship between Gandhi and his eldest son, Harilal, much to Kasturba’s growing despair, was fracturing around this time. Jailed as many as six times from 1908 to 1911, Harilal Gandhi was a “star” in courting prison (Rajmohan Gandhi 162). He had sent his wife, and their two-year-old daughter, Rami, back to Rajkot in 1910. Before leaving for India himself, in May 1911, in order to attempt the Matriculation exam again, he charged his father with “never praising his sons,” favouring his nephews, being “hard hearted towards his boys and their mother, and unconcerned about the sons’ future” (163).

We encounter little of Kasturba over the next year, except a fleeting reference to repeated bouts of ill health in the form of “bleeding and acute pain” most likely exacerbated by menopause in 1911 (Guha 404). Following a change in the immigration laws in South Africa, which no longer remained “colony-specific,” Gandhi returned to the Phoenix Settlement in Natal in 1913, to “live with his family and his disciples on the farm he had founded eight years previously” (444). In March of that year, a judgement passed by Justice Searle in a
Cape Town court “called into question the validity of Indian marriages,” by virtue of the fact that they were not sanctioned by the Church (446). The judgement, “if interpreted literally and implemented vigorously” threatened to “sunder husband from wife” and “mother from children” (447). Kasturba volunteered to go to jail in protest against this law, showing “her solidarity with the Indian community as a whole” and becoming among the first women satyagrahis in Gandhi’s cause (448). Accordingly, as one team of women passive resisters marched from the Transvaal to Natal, Kasturba led a group of sixteen satyagrahis from the Phoenix ashram, including the wives of Chhaganlal and Maganlal Gandhi and the daughter of Gandhi’s close friend, Pranjivan Mehta, and her third son, Ramdas, in a bid “to ‘invade’ the Transvaal by entering it without permits from Natal,” thereby courting arrest and imprisonment (Rajmohan Gandhi 172-3). They were arrested on September 23, 1913, and held at Volksrust before being sentenced to “three months’ imprisonment with hard labour” at the Pietermaritzburg jail (173). The women of Phoenix were joined in prison by their Transvaal satyagraha compatriots on October 21. When the women complained about the food they were given in jail, and “asked for a different diet,” they were told that “jail was not a hotel” (173, 174). Manilal Gandhi, too, was arrested and imprisoned on October 1. Gandhi, meanwhile, marched with about over a thousand protesters, including striking Indian miners, to the Transvaal border, courting arrest yet again, for which he was charged with “inducing indentured labour to leave Natal” in Dundee and sentenced to a year in prison (478).

Ramachandra Guha says that while Gandhi documented his prison terms in great detail, Kasturba “left no record of her ordeal” (Guha 496). However, Arun Gandhi describes how Kasturba helped her fellow satyagrahis in jail “find the will and courage to survive the harsh prison routine,” by motivating them to “finish the heavy laundry work and endless sewing tasks assigned daily” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 185-6). On December 13, Gandhi and his prison companions, Herman Kallenbach and Henry Polak, were released, and went to receive Kasturba at Pietermaritzburg upon her release on December 22. Arun Gandhi writes that the eight-week sentence had taken such a toll on his grandmother’s health, that when Kasturba stepped out of the jail premises with her fellow prisoners, bystanders assumed that “the tiny, frail, careworn woman who was the first to emerge,” was Gandhi’s mother (188). The women satyagrahis were pulled in “a flower-strewn carriage” through the streets to honour their sacrifice (Guha 495). The release of the satyagrahis was followed by the formation of an Enquiry Commission by the British government in South Africa to examine the political and economic needs of the Indians. Interestingly, none of these events finds any mention in Gandhi’s autobiography. In February 1914, Kasturba took critically ill again; she could not “sit without support” or “eat solid food,” subsisting on grapes and oranges to stay alive (510). Under Gandhi’s constant nursing and care, her health gradually improved
by the second week of March (510). Gandhi and Kasturba returned to Phoenix in May of that year. Following the publication of the bill of the Enquiry Commission with recommendations mostly favourable to the Indians in South Africa including the recognition of “past monogamous marriages” in any Indian religion, the abolition of the £3 tax, and the permission to the government to “provide free passage to anyone in South Africa who wished to go back permanently to India” (516). With that, Gandhi believed that his work in South Africa was done, and chose to return to India for good. Kasturba and he attended a series of farewell parties in Durban, Phoenix, Verulam, Johannesburg and Cape Town, from where they departed for England, along with Hermann Kallenbach in July 1914. They arrived in London two days after the First World War broke out, for which Gandhi rallied around to organise an ambulance corps (Fischer 158). However, when he suffered a severe attack of pleurisy, “aggravated by too much fasting,” which took a “serious turn,” the doctor treating Gandhi ordered the couple to return to India at the earliest (158). Kasturba and Gandhi arrived in Bombay on January 9, 1915, experiencing “joy” at “get[ting] back to the homeland after an exile of ten years” (M. K. Gandhi 301).

2.1.4 Return to India (1915 – 1920)

Upon their return to India, Gandhi met the Governor of Bombay, Lord Willingdon, and then the couple left for Poona to meet his political mentor, Gopal Krishna Gokhale, following which he went to Rajkot and Porbandar “to meet my brother’s widow and other relatives” (314). Gandhi’s autobiography, as is evident in the previous sentence, recounts these events in first person singular, thereby offering the reader little knowledge on whether Kasturba did indeed accompany him on these visits. However, Arun Gandhi confirms that it was a “sad encounter for Kasturba” to see her “once-vivacious and vibrant sisters-in-law living in the shadowed half-life of Indian widows” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 196, 197). From Rajkot, Gandhi and Kasturba went to Shantiniketan, near Calcutta to reunite with other members of the Phoenix settlement, including their sons, who had arrived there separately from Durban, and were residing in “separate quarters” of the university town. While Tagore was not at Shantiniketan at the time, Gandhi and his Phoenix party employed their reformist zeal from South Africa, to “[turn] the place upside down” (Fischer 164). They persuaded the entire community of staff and students “to run the kitchen, handle the garbage, clean the latrines, sweep the grounds and, in general, forsake the muse for the monk,” to which, Tagore, upon his return, “acquiesced tolerantly” (164). Within a week of their stay in Shantiniketan, Gandhi and Kasturba received news of Gokhale’s death, and “the same day,” says Gandhi, “I left for Poona with my wife and Maganlal” (M. K. Gandhi 319). In a chapter titled “Woes of Third Class Passengers,” Gandhi recounts the “hardships” that he and Kasturba had to suffer as third class passengers from Burdwan in West Bengal to Kalyan in Maharashtra to attend
Gokhale’s funeral. At the Kalyan station, where they reached “dead tired,” Maganlal and Gandhi used water from the station water-pipe to have their bath, but the patriarch “connived at the impropriety” of allowing Kasturba to “avail herself” of the second class bathroom as his wife; an indication of his need to enmesh the personal with the political, and also Gandhi’s co-opting of Kasturba’s individuality, once again, to further his notions of reform.

After attending the last rites, Gandhi, acting on a promise to Gokhale to maintain a year of silence, and spend some time as “an observer and a student” before he attempted to plunge into nationalist politics, decided that he would journey across the country to understand it better (Rajmohan Gandhi 191). To that extent, the months that followed witnessed “a lot of travelling” and “much of it by third class- coaches” by Kasturba and Gandhi (191). The couple journeyed to Rangoon to meet Gandhi’s old friend, Pranjivan Mehta; to Kangri in the Himalayan foothills to meet Mahatma Munshi Ram; to Delhi, where Gandhi met the city’s leaders; and finally to South India (192). Their oldest son, Harilal, “accompanied them on some of their travels,” during which Gandhi and he had “long father-son talks” (197). However, the gulf between the two was never bridged, and Harilal went to Calcutta to take up an “office job” with a Gujarati businessman (198). Meanwhile, Jivanji Desai, an “Ahmedabad-based barrister” offered “on rent his large house in Kochrab” to Gandhi, who accepted his offer and made it the home of his comrades and disciples from Phoenix, including Kasturba and his sons in May 1915 (193). They christened it the “Satyagraha ashram” (193). It was here that an important and well-documented episode involving the adoption of an untouchable family took place, the representation of which will be discussed in greater detail in the next chapter which will deal with the domestic life of the Gandhis. In 1916, Harilal Gandhi lost his job “on charges that he had misappropriated funds” and not repaid a loan to his employer (Rajmohan Gandhi 198). Meanwhile, Manilal, his younger brother, was “expelled from the ashram” by his father “for lending Harilal money from the ashram funds,” and sent to Madras, where he was ordered to earn the money given to his brother” (198). In the spring of 1917, Gandhi and Kasturba visited Calcutta for the birth of Harilal’s youngest child, a daughter called Manu, when Gandhi got called away by a farmer, Rajkumar Shukla, to the Champaran district in Bihar, where he would begin his first Satyagraha movement against the oppressive “tinkathia system” of indigo cultivation on behalf of the farmers in central India (M. K. Gandhi 337). Kasturba stayed on in Calcutta, remaining “totally absorbed in caring for Gulab and the newborn infant, and taking care of the other children” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 209).

Gandhi, with assistance from Rajendra Prasad, Brij Kishore Babu and Maulana Mazharul Huq, “proceeded to conduct a far-flung inquiry into the grievances of the farmers” in
Champaran, taking down “depositions by about ten thousand peasants” and collecting documents to build a case against the British planters in the region (Fischer 193, 194). The Mahatma spent “an initial uninterrupted period” of seven months in Champaran, and returned for “several shorter visits” (194). Kasturba Gandhi, along with her youngest son, Devadas, was among the volunteers summoned by Gandhi to work towards the social and economic amelioration of the Champaran villagers. He established primary schools in six villages in the district, even as Kasturba taught the inhabitants of the region “ashram rules on personal cleanliness and community sanitation” (195). Kasturba took on a “district-wide campaign” which required “massive re-education” in a region where “men, women and children, ignorant of the consequences, had been spitting, urinating and even defecating, wherever it was convenient” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 213). She began “organising groups of women and children to clean the whole village” and taught them how to make brooms, which were used first to sweep homes, and then “the village’s courtyards and lanes” (213). Gandhi narrates an incident when he and Kasturba visited a small village near Bhitiharva in the region, where he found some of the womenfolk “dressed very dirtily” (M. K. Gandhi 352). Kasturba was deputed to enquire of the women “why they did not wash their clothes” (352). One of the women took Kasturba into her hut and showed her around, saying, “there is no box or cupboard here containing other clothes” (352). The sari she wore was the only one in her possession. “Tell Mahatmaji to get me another sari,” she said, “and I shall then promise to bathe and put on clean clothes every day” (352). The next day at noon, says Arun Gandhi, Kasturba “collected the women and the young children and led them to the river to bathe,” and turned the process of bathing and washing clothes into a “game” enabling the women and children to clean themselves and their garments in batches, with the clothes drying “very soon” in the “warm mid-day sun” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 214, 215). The women, “all clean and tidy, with skin glowing and hair glistening in the sun” were “laughing and chattering,” looking “happier than Ba had ever seen them” (215). This incident, however, cites no sources—oral or written—and finds no mention either in Gandhi’s autobiography, or any of the other biographies in this study.

Through their persistent efforts, an inquiry was appointed by the Lieutenant Governor, Sir Edward Gait, to investigate the grievances of the Champaran farmers, which “found in favour of the ryots” and recommended that the tinkathia system should be “abolished by law” (M. K. Gandhi 354). An agrarian bill was passed in accordance with the Committee’s resolutions, putting an end to the oppression of cultivators in the district (354). In early 1918, Gandhi involved himself in two new causes, that of the farmers who were “unable to pay the assessment” following “the failure of crops in the Kheda district,” and also that of the underpaid mill-hands in Ahmedabad led by Anusyabai Sarabhai against her own brother, Ambalal, who was a strong supporter of the Mahatma (355). These satyagraha movements
do not seem to have involved Kasturba, who returned to Kochrab after her work in Champaran. However, when plague broke out in Kochrab, Gandhi, who saw “evident danger to the safety of the Ashram children” moved the inhabitants out of Kochrab to a new location that interested him owing to its “vicinity to the Sabarmati Central Jail,” setting up a new ashram that would remain the couple’s principal residence for the next fifteen years (M. K. Gandhi 357). In July 1918, Gandhi, who had been on a strenuous and unsuccessful drive to recruit soldiers for the First World War from Kheda district, made himself “seriously ill” with an attack of dysentery and then “an operation for fissures necessitated by it”(Fischer 203, 224). This “first important illness in his life” will be discussed in the context of Kasturba’s ingenuity in getting Gandhi, who had hitherto sworn to “abjure milk forever,” to drink goat’s milk in order to regain life and health, through a close reading of the representation/construction of the incident by Gandhi and other biographers in Chapter IV of this study (203). Meanwhile, after completing his stint in Madras, Manilal went back to the Phoenix settlement in South Africa to take over a struggling Indian Opinion, while Ramdas, Gandhi’s third son, “sold cloth and worked for a tailor in Johannesburg” (Rajmohan Gandhi 217). Devadas Gandhi was sent to Madras “to teach Hindi” and “seek thereby to bridge the gulf between south and north India” (217). Harilal’s wife, Gulab, fell ill and succumbed to influenza in her family home in Rajkot in October 1918, as did her youngest son, Shanti, following which, her four surviving children, Rami, Kanti, Rasik and Manu, were brought, first to Bombay where Gandhi was recuperating from his fistula surgery, and later to the Sabarmati Ashram to remain “in the care of their grandparents” (218).

March 1919 witnessed the enactment of one of the most draconian anti-sedition Rowlatt bills, which authorised “arrests without trial and trials without appeal for suspected seditionists” in the country even after the War had ended. In protest, Gandhi called for an “All-India hartal” in the observance of which Hindu and Muslim protesters presented a united front on March 30 in Delhi, and other parts of the country on April 6 (221). The hartal “parlay[s]ed economic life” in the country and Gandhi motivated six hundred men and women to sign the Satyagraha pledge in Bombay (Fischer 226). However, incidents of violence in Delhi and the Punjab led to the imposition of martial law in Amritsar; when Gandhi rushed to the city, he was “stopped at the borders of the province” and escorted back to Bombay (227). He returned to the Sabarmati ashram and undertook “a seventy-two hour fast” as penance for the violence caused by the hartal (228). This was followed by the brutal gunning down of hundreds of unarmed protesters by General Reginald Dyer in Jallianwala Bagh in the city (219). Gandhi viewed the hartal, which also caused instances of violence in Gujarat, as a “Himalayan miscalculation” and suspended the civil disobedience movement (M. K. Gandhi 391). He returned to Bombay and "raised a corps of satyagrahi volunteers" for the work of "educating the people with regard to the meaning and inner
significance of Satyagraha" (392). In October of 1919, Gandhi visited Lahore and was accommodated in the bungalow of Rambhuj Dutt Chaudhary, where he made a crucial acquaintance with the latter’s wife, Sarladevi (M. K. Gandhi 396). This association and its impact on his marriage to Kasturba will be discussed in some detail in the last section of this chapter which deals with the absence of literacy and agency in Kasturba’s in shaping her own narrative. Through many months of 1920, as the matriarch of the ashram in Gandhi’s absence, Kasturba oversaw "the day-to-day operations at Sabarmati" with assistance from "her husband’s loyal lieutenant," Maganlal Gandhi, an indication of her organisational skills (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 235). She also made time to join Gandhi on visits to "nearby towns and villages" (236). As an advocate of the khadi or home-spun revolution initiated by her husband, Kasturba spent an hour everyday "spinning or weaving" and carried her charkha along with her on these short excursions, making an impression on numerous women who wished to emulate her across India’s villages (236).

**Becoming a Satyagrahi: (1921—1933)**

Through 1920, Gandhi expended great energy attempting to convince the Indian National Congress of his swadeshi and non-cooperation agendas in the Calcutta and Nagpur Congress sessions, as also the need for Hindu-Muslim unity in sustaining the Khilafat movement in support of the Islamic caliphate in Turkey (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 248-9). Meanwhile, the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms, also called “The Government of India Act of 1919,” were approved by the British House of Commons, and “became the new Constitution of India” in February 1921, offering a “dyarchy,” which the Congress begrudgingly accepted (Fischer 240). Later that year, Gandhi launched his famous non-cooperation movement, and “toured the country incessantly, indefatigably, in torrid, humid weather, addressing mammoth mass meetings of a hundred thousand and more persons” for seven months (Fischer 244). On these travels, he was often accompanied by Kasturba and Mahadev Desai, his secretary and confidant; and met by throngs of followers who often would not let them sleep (Rajmohan Gandhi 260). This wave of non-cooperation that swept through the country included “a somewhat guarded boycott of schools and courts,” the “acquisition of spinning wheels,” followed by the “boycott of foreign cloth and the manufacture of Khadi,” and eventually, the encouragement of government employees to “withdraw from service,” with several areas undertaking civil disobedience including “non-payment of taxes” (Brown 163). Gandhi and Kasturba presided over a “great ceremonial bonfire where foreign finery was consigned to the flames” (162). Kasturba “insisted,” says Arun Gandhi, “on relinquishing her favourite sari to be burned,” which was “a treasured gift from their old friend Gokhale” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 237). He also presents Kasturba from the point-of-view of Vithal Laxman Phadke, a resident of Kochrab Ashram, who had been deputed by Gandhi to work
with depressed classes near Baroda, who in his later recollections, would discuss how Kasturba would “go with him to each location and visit each home, offering advice and instruction to the women” (237). Rajmohan Gandhi, too, refers to jottings by Krishnadas of Bengal who visited Sabarmati Ashram in October of 1921, where he commented on how Kasturba “loyally and uncomplainingly cooked for Gandhi’s guests” and possessed an “instinctive understanding of Gandhi’s needs” (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 261-2).

As the non-cooperation movement gained momentum, the government had begun to round up political leaders like C. R. Das, Motilal Nehru, Lala Lajpat Rai and hundreds of others; by the end of the year nearly 30,000 people had been jailed for “civil disobedience and sedition” (Fischer 247). Following incidents of strife between “Muslim cultivators and their Hindu landlords” in the Moplah Rebellion on the Malabar coast, “violent rioting” in Bombay upon the arrival of the Prince of Wales in November of 1921, and the “massacre of twenty-two policemen” with “sickening savagery” in the Chauri Chaura district of Uttar Pradesh in February 1922, Gandhi suspended the civil disobedience movement despite widespread opposition from his colleagues in the Congress and satyagrahis across the country (Brown 165-167). Later that year, Mustafa Kemal, the Turkish army chief, abolished the caliphate (eventually establishing the Republic of Turkey in 1923), and “knocked the bottom out of the Khilafat issue” on which Gandhi had managed to unite Hindus and Muslims (267). The Mahatma was arrested at the ashram on March 10, and accompanied by Kasturba and a few others to the Sabarmati Jail (Rajmohan Gandhi 269). He was tried for sedition at an Ahmedabad court and sentenced to six years’ imprisonment in Yeravda Jail in Poona (Fischer 260). Following Gandhi’s incarceration, Kasturba “dictated” an appeal at the Sabarmati Ashram, exhorting the readers of Young India “to carry out the constructive program[mme] of the Congress,” the success of which would not only “solve the economic problem of India in relation to the masses,” but also “free us from political bondage” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 239). She encouraged the readers of the publication to “give up their foreign cloth and adopt khadi,” and implored women to make it a “religious duty” to spin and produce yarn; finally she urged all merchants to “cease trading in foreign piece goods” (239). During Gandhi’s Yeravda incarceration, he was visited in turn by Ramdas and Harilal, both of whom expressed their desire to marry. Gandhi sent word to Ramdas through Jamnalal Bajaj, saying that if he “had to marry” he should find “a virtuous girl from a poor family” to take as his life partner (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 278). Before his arrest, his second son, Manilal, too had conveyed his wish to settle down, although “Gandhi discouraged him” (278).

Gandhi stipulated to his widowed son, Harilal, that he would accept the proposition of Harilal’s remarriage only if the latter found “a widow with as many children as [he did],” and
the couple expressed wholehearted acceptance of each other’s children (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 242-3). When Kasturba visited Harilal in Calcutta later that year, with his four children, she is said to have “fully supported her husband’s condemnation of the cruel hardships suffered by widows in India,” and encouraged her son to marry a widow with children (243). In January 1924, suffering tremendous abdominal pain, an “emaciated Gandhi” was moved to Sassoon Hospital in Poona, where he underwent an emergency appendectomy; owing to his condition, he was “unconditionally released” within two years of his prison term (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 282). He spent a few days in convalescence in the “seaside home in Juhu” offered to him by Bombay businessman, Narottam Morarjee (283). Following an AICC meeting in Ahmedabad in June of that year, it was decided that the non-cooperation movement would be given up, and Gandhi began to focus entirely on the “three planks” of Khadi, Hindu-Muslim unity and a struggle against Untouchability towards “national reconciliation” (284). When Gandhi heard of an incident of brutal Hindu-Muslim violence in Kohat in the Northwest Frontier, in September of that year, he went on a twenty-one-day fast in the home of Muhammad Ali in Delhi (291). By the mid-1920s, says Arun Gandhi, his grandmother was growing “ever more restive, wondering what would become of her sons” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 248). While she received distressing news that Harilal’s life in Calcutta was “increasingly dissolute” having “squandered” money collected from investors “on wine, women and gambling” leading to a “financial disaster,” it was also time to find a bride for her second son, Manilal, whose relationship with a Muslim woman had been summarily rejected by Gandhi (247-8). In 1925, Kasturba and Gandhi were joined in Sabarmati Ashram by Madeleine Slade, “an English admiral’s thirty-three-year-old daughter,” whom Gandhi christened “Mirabehn,” and who became a “helper, ally—and disciple” of the patriarch (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 302-3).

In 1926, Gandhi enjoyed something of a “moratorium from politics,” focusing entirely on spinning and weaving Khadi, and promoting it across India (Fischer 308). He also practised a weekly day of silence, which gave him “some privacy,” but although he did not travel or address mass meetings through the year, he “talked, wrote, received visitors and maintained a correspondence with thousands of persons in India and other countries” (298). Kasturba and Gandhi also participated in a spinning contest organised at the Sabarmati Ashram, where as the “oldest members of the community,” they were “beaten by the youngest, their granddaughter” (308). In the latter months of 1926 and in early 1927, Gandhi was “quite weak and ill” and spent “several months in Bangalore” to recuperate with C. Rajagopalachari for company (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 306). It was here that he was informed by Devadas Gandhi of his desire to marry Rajagopalachari’s fifteen-year-old daughter, Lakshmi (306). The two patriarchs said that “parental permission” would be granted only if, “after a few years spent without seeing or writing to each other they still
wanted to marry” (306). In March 1927, Kasturba arranged the wedding of Manilal with Sushila, the daughter of Gandhi’s followers, Nanabhai and Vijayalaxmi Mushruwala in the Akola district of Maharashtra, following which the newlyweds returned to the Phoenix Settlement in South Africa (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 248-9). As wedding gifts from the bridegroom’s parents, the couple received “a copy of the Gita, another of ashram prayer songs, a ‘takli’ or spindle for spinning, and two rosaries made of yarn spun by Gandhi” (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 305). In January of 1928, Ramdas, the Gandhis’ third son, married Nirmala Vora at the Sabarmati Ashram with his parents’ blessings (306). When an all-white statutory commission led by Sir John Simon toured India in February of 1928, in a bid to make “constitutional proposals,” it was greeted with black flags and boycotted across the country “with Gandhi’s approval” (316). In April 1928, Gandhi lost an extremely valuable ally and follower with the death of Maganlal Gandhi, which left him feeling “heartbroken” and “widowed” (310-1).

That year, Gandhi galvanized Vallabhbhai Patel to guide “87,000 peasants in a peaceful revolt against a 22 per cent increase in taxes decreed by the British government” (Fischer 320). After four months of non-violent struggle, the Bardoli satyagraha proved to be a huge success, when the “tax increase was virtually scrapped” and property seized from the peasants was duly returned (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 317). In February of 1929, Kasturba and Harilal rushed to Delhi, where Devadas Gandhi was looking after Harilal’s second son, Rasik, who had contracted typhoid. Gandhi and Kasturba had played a vital role in raising the boy after the death of his mother nearly a decade earlier, and were deeply grieved when their grandson succumbed to his illness (311). On March 12, 1930, Gandhi set off from the Sabarmati Ashram with seventy-eight of his disciples including his son, Manilal, and grandson, Kanti, on a march to Dandi, to carry out his momentous salt satyagraha (Fischer 336). Before the satyagrahis left the ashram, they were each anointed with a red “kumkum dot” by Kasturba, the matriarch of the establishment, who also made a short speech to the wives and daughters of the departing men, urging them to be brave in the face of this revolution (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 252). On April 6, Gandhi, who had reached Dandi the previous evening accompanied by his fellow satyagrahis, “dipped into the water, returned to the beach, and there picked up some salt left by the waves” (Fischer 337). What followed was “an insurrection without arms,” as every villager along India’s sea coast “went to the beach or waded into the sea with a pan to make salt” (337). Kasturba attended meetings in Dandi and Vijalpur where Gandhi exhorted women to participate in the satyagraha campaign by “picket[ing] sales of liquor and foreign cloth” (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 336). Ramdas and Devadas Gandhi were arrested in different parts of the country for manufacturing and selling contraband salt, along with thousands of other
In the early hours of May 5, Gandhi was arrested without trial, and taken to Yeravda Jail in Poona (338). In his absence, Kasturba blessed a group of satyagrahis led by Abbas Tyabji on May 12, who “set off for the Dharsana salt depot” only to be arrested and jailed soon after (338). On May 21, Manilal Gandhi, accompanied by Sarojini Naidu, Imam Bawazeer and Pyarelal, “led around 2,500 satyagrahis” to the salt heaps in the cordoned ditches of the Dharsana salt depot, where “successive columns wading through ditches and trying to reach the barbed wire” were attacked by policemen using “iron-tipped lathis” (339). While “scores were brutally hit in the head and shoulders,” the protesters remained nonviolent, leaving the ground where they fell “blood-soaked” (339). Manilal, Naidu, Bawazeer and Pyarelal were arrested along with several others. Manilal suffered from a skull fracture, and following a slow recovery, was incarcerated in the Sabarmati Jail “to serve out his six-month sentence,” where he was visited by Kasturba and Sushila (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 255). Ramdas, too, had been imprisoned in Sabarmati. Arun Gandhi records his mother’s recollection of this visit, as Kasturba spoke to her sons “with perfect calm – not commiserating with them,” and enquired about the other incarcerated satyagrahis, “getting news for families who were not permitted visits” (256). Leaving the running of the Sabarmati Ashram to others, she went “from town to town” urging women to take part in “the newest phase of civil disobedience—the picketing of government-owned liquor stores” (256). Gandhi, Pyarelal, Nehru, Rajagopalachari, Patel, and other Congress Working Committee members were released from prison on January 31, 1931 (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 346). Arun Gandhi says that Kasturba also accompanied Gandhi to “high-level discussions with the Viceroy in Simla,” and was received by Lady Willingdon; it was the first time that a “Vicerine had invited the wife of an Indian political leader,” which caused “eyebrows to be raised among the British officials and their wives” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 257). In the last days of August 1931, Gandhi sailed off to London with Mahadev Desai, Pyarelal, Mirabehn and Devadas as his aides in addition to Pandit Malviya, Sarojini Naidu, and G. D. Birla to attend the second Round Table Conference on constitutional reform (Fischer 351).

Upon Gandhi’s departure from Bombay, Kasturba went to Ahmedabad “to work among the poor” and “[help] former prisoners readjust to family life” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 257). Kasturba’s presence in the Indian national movement, inspired Indian women from South Africa to donate funds directly to her, without any solicitation on her part, to which she offered a brief note of thanks which was published in Indian Opinion (258). When Gandhi returned to India in December of that year, following “a bitter clash” with Ambedkar over “a
separate electorate and reserved seats for ‘Untouchables,’ along with a breakdown of communication with the Muslim leadership which “insisted on a separate Muslim electorate,” he was received by Kasturba, Patel and Rajagopalachari, who informed him that Nehru and Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan, his aide and follower in the North-West Frontier Province, had been arrested (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 364). Gandhi also discovered that in his absence, "Emergency Powers Ordinances" had been promulgated in the United Provinces, the North-West Frontier Province and Bengal to tackle the "widespread no-rent movement" (Fischer 374). Further, the military had been authorised to "seize buildings, impound bank balances, confiscate wealth, arrest suspects without a warrant," in addition to which the government began to "suspend court trials, deny bail and habeas corpus, withdraw mailing privileges from the press, disband political organ[i]sations, and prohibit picketing and boycotting" (374). Gandhi and Patel were arrested on January 4, 1932, from Mani Bhavan in Bombay (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 365). Kasturba was tearful at being parted from her husband within a week of his return from England. She asked for Gandhi's forgiveness "if I have offended you in any way," a request the Mahatma interpreted in his conversations with Vallabhbhai Patel and Mahadev Desai, as a reflection of Kasturba's fear that "we may never meet again on this side of the grave" (365). Gandhi and Patel were incarcerated in Yeravda prison in Poona, where they were later joined by Desai. About 14,800 people were arrested in January, and 17,800 in February, implementing repressive measures, "more drastic," according to Winston Churchill, "than any since the 1857 Mutiny" (Fischer 376).

Upon Gandhi's arrest, Kasturba returned to the Sabarmati Ashram, where "she and several other women were immediately picked up" and jailed in the Sabarmati prison (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 259). This was her first incarceration in the India's freedom struggle against the British. She was sentenced to six weeks of imprisonment. She was arrested again and sent to serve a six-month sentence in Sabarmati in the summer of the same year (260). The letters that Gandhi wrote to Kasturba during this time, "were not delivered to her," and some of her letters "were not given to him" (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 366). On August 17 of that year, the British government awarded a separate electorate to the depressed classes, in response to which, Gandhi declared that he would "cease taking 'food of any kind save water with or without salt and soda' from noontime on 20 September" if this decision was not revised (370). It was a fast that took a tremendous toll on his health and left him "listless," from irregular consumption of water, as "sharp pains racked his wasting body" within the first three days (Fischer 393). Kasturba, who was transferred from Sabarmati prison to Yeravda, upon the commencement of her husband’s fast unto death, is said to have walked towards Gandhi, shaking her head "reprovingly" and said, "Again the same story!" to which he smiled (394). "Her presence," says Fischer, "cheered [Gandhi]," who
"submitted to a massage from her" (394). Gandhi and Ambedkar, who were fierce adversaries during the Round Table Conference in London a few months before, met again, and after aggressive negotiations under a mango tree in the jail courtyard, signed the historic Poona Pact, in which Gandhi's "acceptance of reserved seats" was "matched by the acceptance of a common electorate" by leaders of the depressed classes, led by Ambedkar (Rajmohan Gandhi, *Mohandas*, 374). Gandhi then "broke his fast, sipping orange juice handed to him by a relieved Kasturba" (374). She served the last few weeks of her six-month sentence in the "women's section" of Yeravda, which allowed her to "[visit] Mohandas daily, and [prepare] food for him on a small Primus stove made available for this purpose" (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 262).

Gandhi’s fast also led to a "family reunion of sorts," with visits from his son Devadas, who was recovering from an attack of typhoid in his just-completed jail sentence, and Manilal, who arrived from South Africa with his wife and daughter for a short spell (262). Upon her release in December, Kasturba immediately plunged back into work, first by representing her husband at "the opening of the anti-Untouchability conference in Madras," after which she went on "a tour of the region to plead for Harijan rights" (262). She was arrested and jailed again in February of 1933 for participating in civil disobedience (263). Gandhi, meanwhile, went on another "self-purificatory fast" for twenty-one days in Yeravda, in response to which Mira wrote to him from Sabarmati prison saying Kasturba was "greatly shocked" by his latest decision (Rajmohan Gandhi, *Mohandas*, 380). Soon, she was allowed to join her husband at Yeravda, and Gandhi acknowledged in a letter to Mira, that his wife's courage was "a source of the greatest strength to me" (380). Within hours of the commencement of his fast on May 8, the Raj released Gandhi, "not wanting to risk his death in custody," along with Kasturba and Mahadev Desai, who were then hosted by Lady Premilila Thackersay in Poona (380-1). Here, Gandhi completed his fast as planned, under Kasturba's watchful care and assistance (381). It was in Lady Thackersay's house, too, that Devadas Gandhi wed C. Rajagopalachari's daughter Lakshmi, after five years of separation, "in the presence of both happy fathers" the following month (Fischer 419). Gandhi's wedding gifts to the newlyweds included, characteristically, "a hymn book and a garland of yarn which he had spun" (419). At the end of July, Kasturba, Gandhi and a bunch of followers decided to march to the Kheda village of Ras, "where many peasants had lost their lands" (Rajmohan Gandhi, *Mohandas*, 384). The entire band of satyagrahis was arrested; and Gandhi, Kasturba and Mahadev Desai were sent to Yeravda prison on August 2 (384). They were released on August 4 on the condition that they would stay in Poona; however Gandhi deliberately stepped out of Poona, only to be "arrested again and sentenced for a year" (384).
In Yeravda again, he commenced another fast in protest when he was denied facilities to continue his Harijan work. On August 20, "with his condition worsening," he was moved to Sassoon Hospital, and released a few days later (384). However, Kasturba, along with other women Satyagrahis, remained incarcerated in Yeravda (384). Arun Gandhi’s biography on Kasturba mentions that she was arrested again soon after Gandhi’s self-purification fast in May, for "the sixth time in just two years," and given another six-month sentence to be served in Sabarmati Jail (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 263). According to the author, the British now regarded Kasturba "as even more of a threat to law and order than Gandhi" owing to "her own unique ability to involve women in the independence movement" (263). During this incarceration, she was "separated from other inmates, permitted no visitors, and allowed to correspond only with her husband" (263). This information clashes with that presented by Rajmohan Gandhi earlier. Also, three of the six arrests and imprisonments he mentions are unaccounted for. Rajmohan Gandhi lists "Harilal’s habit of getting into trouble" and the "courage of his son Kanti, who was in jail as a satyagrahi," the "eyes of Ramdas's daughter Sumitra," and the "playfulness of Manilal’s daughter Sita," along with the "pregnancies of Ramdas's wife Nirmala and Devadas's wife Lakshmi," among the subjects on which Gandhi exchanged "weekly letters" with his wife during her Yeravda imprisonment (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 389). Meanwhile, in September 1933, Gandhi "gave Sabarmati Ashram to a Harijan group" and "established headquarters in Wardha, a small town in the Central Provinces" (Fischer 404). In November, he commenced "a ten-month tour for Harijan welfare," visiting "every province in India without once going home to relax or rest" (404-5). Kasturba, who was released at the end of May 1934, joined her husband on his Harijan tour the following month (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 389).

The Final Decade (1934—1944)

On June 25, a Hindu “suspected of opposing equality for Harijans” threw a bomb on a car in Poona “thinking mistakenly that the Mahatma was in it” (Fischer 406). Arun Gandhi says that Kasturba was riding with Gandhi in the automobile, which narrowly escaped being hit (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 265). The bomb hit “the car following theirs, injuring seven people, though none seriously” (265). Kasturba’s presence during this incident, however, is not mentioned by any of the other biographers in this study. After her release, Kasturba, says Arun Gandhi, felt “homeless” in the knowledge that the Sabarmati Ashram had been disbanded (265). For over two years after her release, she “lived her own life,” as a “purposeful pilgrim hurrying on and off trains, crisscrossing the country on missions of mercy, journeying to far-flung towns and villages to encourage rural improvement,” and spending “weeks at a time getting reacquainted with her sons and their families,” besides accompanying her husband on his tours, or staying with him in Sevagram in Wardha (265-6).
In September and October of 1934, Gandhi and Kasturba heard from their oldest son, Harilal, through an exchange of letters, who said that he “wished to start a new life,” and “was learning spinning and other khadi processes from his daughter Manu” (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 397). He also wanted to “settle down and remarry” (397). Gandhi reiterated his stance on widow remarriage, in the hope that Harilal was indeed turning over a new leaf, but Kasturba “remained sceptical” about her son (397). Harilal visited Sevagram in February 1935, on his father’s invitation, his body “looking ravaged,” his face “thin and stained,” and his hair “dishevelled” (397). He wanted to marry Margette Spiegel, “a German schoolteacher,” but the idea “came to nothing” and Harilal returned to Rajkot in May (395).

In April 1936, Kasturba and Gandhi were attending the All India Literary Conference where they ran into Harilal again, who joked about how “several of his friends of various faiths were seeking to convert him to their religions” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 266). At the end of May, the Gandhis were in Bangalore when they encountered, much to their mutual shock, a news item saying that Harilal had “secretly converted to Islam” and now bore the name “Abdulla” (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 398).

Soon, there were stories of “Abdulla Gandhi preaching Islam in different parts of the country,” in the same breath as those of “disorderly conduct” by him, and “proceedings” against him (399). Kasturba addressed her wayward son through an open letter, published in newspapers on September 27, 1936, trying to make him aware of the “misery you are causing your aged parents in the evening of their lives,” and how she was “unable to move about among my friends or strangers” for “sheer shame” (Fischer 267-8). She cautioned him against preaching religion, even as “people are liable to be led away by the fact that you are your father’s son” (268). She also openly addressed the Muslims who “celebrated” Harilal’s conversion by saying, “[w]hat you have been doing would not be reasonable in the eyes of Khuda” (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 399). Arun and Rajmohan Gandhi discuss an anecdote by Narayan, Mahadev Desai’s son, which occurred around this time, where Gandhi and Kasturba encounter Harilal at a train station on one of their many travels, during which Harilal valorised his mother and was dismissive of his father. The representation of this incident will be discussed in greater detail through a close reading in Chapter IV of this study. Gandhi, meanwhile, moved out of Jamnalal Bajaj’s house in Wardha, which he had used as his base for nearly two years, and set up living quarters for himself and Kasturba, Mira and Mahadev Desai, among others, in the village of Segaon, five miles away (405). This tiny settlement grew into the Sevagram Ashram, which means “Village of Service” (405). While Gandhi had officially retired from Congress politics in 1935, he was regularly called in to settle brewing disputes between Jawaharlal Nehru and Vallabhbhai Patel over the presidency of the Indian National Congress (406-7). There was also a growing rift between the Congress and the Muslim League, led by Muhammed Ali Jinnah, especially with regard
to the sharing of seats in some of the provincial assemblies where the Congress had emerged the clear contender to form ministries following victories in the polls of February 1937 (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 408).

This participation in provincial and central elections had been prompted by the Congress's acceptance of the "new British Constitution," also called the Act of India 1935 (Fischer 427). Gandhi "saw 'decay' setting into the Congress rank and file, and felt the party was not non-violent enough to be able to lead the Indian masses in acts of passive resistance and civil disobedience (428). In early 1938, Gandhi, Mahadev Desai and Kasturba, among others were in Orissa; when Kasturba and Durga, Desai's wife, entered the premises of the Puri Jagannath Temple (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 414). During Gandhi's fast against the separate electorate for the depressed classes in 1932, numerous temples across the length and breadth of India, had set aside their discrimination against untouchables and opened doors to communities that were hitherto prohibited from entering them for fear of pollution. Gandhi and his followers refused to enter temples that still upheld the 'Untouchability' sanction; the Puri Jagannath Temple was one of them. Kasturba and Durga's decision to enter the temple, and its impact on Gandhi and Mahadev Desai, too, will be discussed at length through a close reading of the representation of Kasturba's actions and ensuing remorse in Chapter IV of this study. Meanwhile, Gandhi initiated correspondence with Jinnah to address the growing Muslim separatism, to be informed by the latter that the "only basis for productive talks" was for "both sides to accept that the League represented India's Muslims, while Gandhi and the Congress spoke for India's Hindus" (417). Yet another situation was brewing in Rajkot in the middle of 1938. Its "feeble and irresponsible" ruler, Dharmendrasinh, had "squandered funds" and allowed his dewan to "auction monopolies for selling rice, matches, sugar and cinema tickets," besides selling a "monopoly for gambling" and proposing the mortgage of Rajkot's powerhouse (439). There were also "persistent rumours" about Dharamsinh's "sexual abuse of some of his young women subjects;" when these rumours were proved true, the women of Rajkot were "outraged" and began "offering Satyagraha" by using "nonviolent public protests to court arrest" (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 278). Maniben, Vallabhbhai Patel's daughter, was one of the numerous satyagrahis who were arrested by the Thakore of Rajkot. Kasturba, too, decided to participate in the protests in her native town, taking Ambalal Sarabhai's daughter, Mridula, with her (279). She was arrested on February 3, 1939, and taken to Tramba, "to be confined in the royal summer residence," where the king allegedly conducted his notorious sexual assaults on women (279). Kasturba was kept in "solitary confinement" for almost a week, "locked away in a dark, closet-like room of the Tramba bungalow;" however, when her incarceration "spawned fresh clashes," she was released from solitary confinement, and Mridula Sarabhai and Maniben Patel joined her in the Tramba Palace (280). Gandhi arrived
in Rajkot, and commenced a fast on March 3, demanding a response from the Thakore on his atrocities. Kasturba, Maniben and Mridula were released on March 6.

The following day, "an agreement was reached," and the Thakore granted "amnesty to all prisoners arrested during the protests," and even agreed to appoint a "political reform committee" (283). However, Dharamsinh's dewan, Virawala, fuelled "minority fears" in Rajkot, leading to a "600-strong mob of sword-swinging Bhayats and lathi-charging Muslims" breaking up a prayer meeting led by Gandhi in Rajkot on April 16, and attempted to "forcibly disperse a cordon of unarmed volunteers around [him]" (Rajmohan Gandhi, *Mohandas*, 441). While the mob was unsuccessful in disrupting the prayer meeting, Virawala was able to use the support of the minorities of Rajkot to "block the implementation of the settlement," much to Gandhi's despair (443). Sometime in late 1939, Sushila Nayyar, the sister of Gandhi's secretary, Pyarelal, and a trained medical professional, received an ill Kasturba in Delhi, where she was studying for her doctorate in medicine; Kasturba had come to her for treatment; however, her illness “took a serious turn,” as she developed “a few patches of broncho-pneumonia,” along with the “recrudescence of an old infection in the urinary tract” (Nayyar 26). According to Nayyar's memoir on Kasturba, Gandhi sent “telegram after telegram” enquiring after his wife’s health, and wrote “loving letters” to Kasturba everyday (26). Slowly, she recovered, and was accompanied by Devadas Gandhi and his family back to Sevagram “completely restored to health” despite residual weakness (26). There is a conflict in Sushila Nayyar’s account and that of Arun Gandhi – while the former states that Kasturba’s illness occurred well after the Gandhis’ return from the Northwest Frontier Province (a visit on which they were accompanied by Nayyar), the latter says that the Kasturba fell ill and visited Sushila Nayyar for treatment before they visited the NWFP. Rajmohan Gandhi mentions that Gandhi and Kasturba made a short trip to the Province as guests of Khan Abdul Gaffar Khan in July of 1939 (Rajmohan Gandhi, *Mohandas*, 418). 1939 is also the year that the Second World War broke out. On September 9, “England took India into the war by proclamation” without consulting Indian leaders about the decision, demonstrating proof of “foreign control” that the Indians “resented” (Fischer 438). Gandhi’s tenets of non-violence prevented him from participating in a war effort, even though he “blamed Hitler for the war,” and his sympathies were with the Poles, “in the unequal struggle in which they are engaged for the sake of their freedom” (439).

However, after a meeting in Simla with the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, he “pledged publicly” that he would “not embarrass the government” and would lend “moral support” to the Allies (439). The Congress, on the other hand, was ready to support England’s war effort “if specific conditions were satisfied,” a stance that led to a “friendly but hard battle” between the Congress Working Committee and Gandhi (439). When Linlithgow said that “England
could not define her war aims,” The CWC voted against “aiding Britain” in the Second World War, and instructed the “Congress ministries of the provinces to resign,” aligning the party once again with Gandhi’s ideals (441). Meanwhile, the Hindu-Muslim alliance was further fractured when Jinnah refused to accept the idea of one India, referring to it as a “subcontinent composed of nationalities” (Rajmohan Gandhi, *Mohandas*, 454). This, in effect, began a simmering and long-standing debate on the partition of the land. In July of 1940, the Working Committee met again in Poona to discuss a fresh offer from Linlithgow, and led by Rajagopalachari, much against Gandhi’s wishes, announced that “if India were given complete independence and a central Indian government,” it would enable the Congress to “throw its full weight” behind efforts towards the defence of the country” (Fischer 442-3). In response, the All India Congress Committee (AICC) received a “Viceregal statement” saying that conditional upon an agreement between the Raj, the Congress, the Muslim League and the princes, “some politicians would be included in an expanded Viceroy’s Council in which the Viceroy would retain his veto,” along with the drafting of a “the framework of a new constitution” at the end of the war (Rajmohan Gandhi, *Mohandas*, 463). Stung by the government’s unwillingness to consider total freedom in return for assistance during the war, the AICC turned to Gandhi once again, who initiated a campaign of “individual civil disobedience,” encouraging individuals to condemn and resist war efforts by voicing their opinion (463). By the summer of 1941, over 15,000 satyagrahis “courted prison” and received sentences “ranging between nine and fifteen months” (463). Patel, Rajagopalachari and Nehru received long prison terms, even as Gandhi remained “buried in Sevagram” (466). We have no concrete information on Kasturba over the next two years from the sources reviewed through the course of this study.

When Japan attacked Pearl Harbour in December 1941 and America entered the war, Rajagopalachari “won a majority” of the Congress Working Committee at a meet in Bardoli, for a resolution “recognis[ing] the ‘new world situation’ and offering cooperation, including military support, to the Allies” if India’s freedom were declared (468). Gandhi “withdrew once more” from Congress leadership (Fischer 445). The Prime Minister of England, Winston Churchill, sent Sir Stafford Cripps to India to confer with Gandhi in March 1942 (447). Cripps’s proposal, while offering dominion status to India in its earlier articles, was unpalatable in its other clauses – the Congress inevitably rejected it, and Cripps was recalled to England by Churchill (450). On August 8 of that year, Gandhi launched the historic Quit India movement at an AICC meeting in Bombay (479). Kasturba had accompanied him to the city and the couple was put up at the Birla House, from where Gandhi was arrested along with Mira, Pyarelal and Mahadev Desai at 5.30 am (Nayyar 27). Kasturba announced that she would “address the public meeting” at Shivaji Park later that day in place of her incarcerated husband (28). She and Sushila Nayyar were arrested on their way to the
meeting and confined in the Arthur Road prison (28). Kasturba fell ill and suffered from “loose motions and low temperature” (30). Her condition persisted, even as, a day later, the two prisoners were ferried by train to Poona, to the Aga Khan Palace, where Gandhi, Mira, Sarojini Naidu, Pyarelel and Desai were incarcerated (32). No sooner had Gandhi been imprisoned, than “the sluice gates of violence opened” as “police stations and government buildings were set on fire, telegraph lines destroyed, railroad ties pulled up and a number of British officials assaulted,” leading to several casualties (Fischer 480). Pockets in Bengal, UP, Bihar, Bombay, Karnataka and Orissa “declared themselves free” even as factories around the country “went silent” (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 496). Protesting Indians “streamed out of bazaars, villages and colleges shouting ‘Do or Die’” (496). Rebels were countered by soldiers of the Raj with “arrests, beatings and bullets,” as over 100,000 Indian nationalists, including most key Congress leaders, were jailed “for indefinite terms” (496).

Within a week of the reunion of the satyagrahis in the Aga Khan Palace, Mahadev Desai, Gandhi’s long trusted secretary and confidant, died of a sudden and massive heart attack, much to the shock of his fellow detainees, especially Gandhi and Kasturba (34-5). In December, Gandhi announced in a letter to Lord Linlithgow, that he would undertake yet another twenty-one-day fast to protest the government’s repressive measures against Indians, as also to castigate the British for their apathy in the face of the Bengal famine (Fischer 481-4). Gandhi commenced the fast on February 10, 1943, and was nursed by Kasturba, Sushila Nayyar and Mira (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 502). Kasturba, who was “scarcely fit herself,” remained courageous and stoic even as Gandhi’s fellow detainees dealt with what could be a near-fatal situation for their leader (502). During Gandhi’s fast, “the gates of the Aga Khan Palace were thrown open” with a “stream of visitors” coming to visit him to pay their respects, including his sons, Ramdas and Devadas (Nayyar 48-9). Gandhi broke his fast on March 3, following which the Raj contented itself with the fact that he was “convalescing satisfactorily” (50). Kasturba suffered from an attack of “paroxysmal tachycardia” on March 16, which “lasted about two hours” (50). Less than ten days later, she had another attack, which lasted “almost four hours” (50). Manu, a grandniece of the Gandhis, was transferred, upon Kasturba’s request, from a prison in Nagpur to the Aga Khan Palace to act as a “nurse-companion” to her (51). However, Kasturba began to suffer from frequent heart attacks, which rendered her weak and frail during this incarceration. By December of 1943, she endured breathlessness which began to “interfere with her sleep” (57). Gandhi had been sending out frequent correspondence to the Government requesting better medical attention for Kasturba, as also permission for her to entertain visitors, all of which were casually ignored (58).
In addition to an allopath, Dr. Gilder, Kasturba was eventually granted permission, upon the worsening of her health, to be treated by a “vaidya” (60-61). She was also visited by her sons, Harilal, Devadas and Ramdas (64). Kasturba was particularly anxious to see Harilal, who visited her in a state of inebriation much to her disgust and despair the day before her demise (64). Kasturba Gandhi breathed her last on the evening of February 22, 1944. Her body was cremated in the Aga Khan Palace grounds on the morning of February 23. The representation/construction of Kasturba’s life during her final incarceration in the Aga Khan Palace will be explored in greater measure in the forthcoming chapter, which deals with aspects of the domestic universe of Mohandas and Kasturba Gandhi. The forthcoming sections of this chapter deal with the way in which Kasturba has been represented/constructed visually by the biographers under scrutiny for the purposes of this study; the stereotypical constructs within which her identity has been envisaged and valorised; and the absence of literacy and agency as a key factor in Kasturba’s inability to participate in and influence the narratives on her personal and political life history.

2.2 REPRESENTATIONS OF KASTURBA’S PHYSICAL APPEARANCE BY BIOGRAPHERS

The principal subjects of auto/biography are often constructed visually, inasmuch as their inner lives are decoded and presented to the reader, typically in an attempt to flesh out the character(s) that are being explored and understood. This section analyses the various ways in which Kasturba’s physicality has been represented by various biographers in this study. Each representation is infused with its author’s subjectivity, offering a multiplicity of images of the same character, namely Kasturba. While Mohandas Gandhi, characteristically, does not make any references to his wife’s physical appearance in his autobiography, some biographers have attempted to describe her at length. Referring to a photograph of a twenty-eight-year-old Kasturba “on her first arrival in South Africa in 1897,” Louis Fischer depicts her as “a beautiful woman” who was “elegantly dressed in a rich, silk sari” (Fischer 81). He goes on to describe her “fine oval face” with “eyes wide apart,” a “well-formed nose,” in addition to “delicately curved lips” resting above a “perfectly shaped chin,” which to his mind, made her “very attractive indeed” (81). He also describes Kasturba as “not as tall as Gandhi,” who was standing next to her in the photograph “in a European suit, stiff white collar and stiff white shirt, a gay, striped necktie and a round button in his lapel buttonhole” with a “thin skull cap” covering his head (81). As the principal subject of Fischer’s study, Gandhi also earns a more subjective appraisal by his celebrated biographer, when the latter comments on his “full lips,” which, during the time of this photograph, have come to reflect in Fischer’s mind, “the will-power tempered by powerful emotional self-control,” even if, on the whole, he looks like “the average Indian, who has been
“Europeani[s]ed by constant imitation of the white world (81). Harilal and Manilal Gandhi, both young boys in 1897, are described perfunctorily, as dressed in “knee-length coats and long, Western trousers,” accompanied by “shoes and stockings” (81). Eighteen years later, upon the Gandhis’ final departure from South Africa to England accompanied by Hermann Kallenbach in July 1914, Fischer once again attempts to paint a picture of the couple, now both aged forty-five. While Gandhi was “in European clothes” and looked “gentle, thoughtful and tired,” Kasturba, who wore “a white sari with a gay flower design,” in the biographer’s description, revealed signs of “suffering as well as beauty” (151).

When Fischer visited Gandhi at the Sevagram Ashram in 1942, he recorded his observations of Kasturba, who was seventy-three by this time. With “sunken face, straight mouth and square jaw,” the Mahatma’s wife, twenty-eight years later, “seemed to listen attentively” to what Gandhi had to say, but Fischer did not “hear or see her say a single word to her husband during the entire week,” completing the sentence with “nor he to her” (459). The couple were spotted together at meals and prayers, during which “she sat slightly behind [Gandhi’s] left shoulder fanning him solicitously” (459). Fischer adds that even as “Kasturba always looked at [her husband],” he “rarely looked at her,” and yet, Gandhi “wanted her nearest to him” which he interprets as a sign of great consonance in their relationship (459). To that end, he concludes that “[t]here appeared to be perfect understanding between them” (459). In the chapter, “Two Inner Voices” from The Good Boatman: A Portrait of Gandhi, Rajmohan Gandhi makes a passing comment on Kasturba’s physicality when he describes Mohandas’s inability to dominate or educate his “spirited, beautiful but illiterate wife” (Rajmohan Gandhi, The Good Boatman, 59). However, the rest of the book offers no insights into the author’s perception of his grandmother’s appearance. In Mohandas: The Story of a Man, his People and an Empire, he describes a young Kastur as “lovely and resisting” in the context of Mohandas’s desire to control her (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 8). The adjective “pretty” is used to present her a little later in the book (14). Through the rest of the text, he refrains from making any comments on Kasturba’s physicality. He does, however, present an anecdote of Gandhi, who, having been approached by an artist from Bombay who wished to create a portrait of Kasturba, asked the Mahatma for “a photograph and details” of his wife (655). Gandhi did not have any photographs of Kasturba, but attempted to provide “a few particulars” by saying “the ground of Kasturba’s sari always used to be white,” even if, occasionally, it had “lines or dots in colour” (655, italics mine). “The hem and the borders,” he continues, “used to be coloured,” concluding his unadorned description by saying, “[t]here was no particular choice in the colours” (655).

The Forgotten Woman: The Untold Story of Kastur Gandhi, Wife of Mahatma Gandhi, by Arun and Sunanda Gandhi, unlike the narratives by Rajmohan Gandhi, has far more robustly
inspired images of the author’s grandmother. Early on, he describes Kasturba as “an enchanting youngster,” who was, in addition to being “intelligent, independent...fearless,” also “unusually pretty” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 9). In the chapter “A Child Mother,” the biographer imagines a young and heavily pregnant Kasturba through the daydreams of Gandhi, as he ministered to his ailing father, all the while thinking about “her undressing, brushing and combing her hair, and getting into bed,” waiting to be relieved of his nursing duties so he could join his wife in their room (31). Upon Mohandas’s return from England, the author continues, he realised that Kasturbai “had matured into a beautiful woman,” and soon enough, he was “captivated by his wife’s beauty” (49). He describes her “smooth skin, her large eyes framed by thick lashes, her tiny figure, shapely and supple as ever under the soft folds of her bright-coloured sari,” as also Mohandas’s beguilement as he watched her comb “her long, gleaming black hair,” or studied the “simple grace of her movements,” or hear “the musical tinkle of the tiny silver bells that encircled her slender bare ankles” (50). In the chapter, “I Will Follow...Always,” Arun Gandhi describes a photograph of Kasturba “and her four sons” taken as a “formal portrait” at a photographer’s studio in Bombay in “late autumn of 1903” (111). In the picture, Kasturba looks “resolute and serene,” as she “stands in the [centre] of her little brood,” with “her left arm around her youngest son, three-year-old Devadas,” and “her right hand resting on the little boy’s knee to steady him” as he sits “perched on a tall wooden pedestal” (111). Eleven-year-old Manilal, who stands in front of the carved pedestal, is described as “gravely watchful,” while the “earnest but uncertain” five-year-old Ramdas, to his mother’s right, is seated on what appears to be a “tree stump” (112). Fifteen-year-old Harilal, who stands behind Ramdas, with “a hand on his brother’s shoulder” appear “thin-faced, sober, intense” (112). The author concludes the description by saying that the “handsomely attired group” in the photograph, by all accounts, “might well be a prosperous Parsi family of the period” (112).

Ramachandra Guha, in *Gandhi before India*, shows us the very same photograph, refuting the details provided by Arun Gandhi earlier, including the date of the picture, and the *dramatis personae* that comprise the portrait. The photograph, says Guha in the caption, has been taken circa 1899, where the “infant in [Kasturba’s] arms is Ramdas, the one on the stool Manilal, the one on the right Harilal” (Guha 322). The “eldest of the boys” in the picture, that Arun Gandhi claims as Harilal, is “Gandhi’s sister’s son, Gokaldas,” according to Guha (322). Devadas was born “the following year” (322). Earlier in the book, Guha discusses how photographs of Mohandas Gandhi “as a young man” are “scarce,” even as photographs of Kasturba “as a young lady” are “practically non-existent” (57). Countering Arun Gandhi’s physical descriptions of his grandmother, Guha goes on to say that photographic evidence of Kasturba “taken when she was in her thirties and forties” reveal a “round faced woman of undistinguished appearance” (57). Judith Brown’s biography,
Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope, offers precious little information on Kasturba, and no details on her physical appearance. Sushila Nayyar’s Kasturba: Wife of Gandhi, though full of anecdotes that reveal an intimate understanding of Kasturba’s personality and character, also refrains from describing her visually. The photograph that appears across the biographies by Louis Fischer, Judith Brown, Arun and Sunanda Gandhi and Rajmohan Gandhi is that of Mohandas Gandhi and Kasturba in Indian attire. Gandhi wears the native Kathiawari turban along with a long tunic, dhoti and a shawl draped over his shoulders, while Kasturba stands to his left, in a light printed sari, her hands crossed together in the front, as the couple stare unsmilingly into the camera. While Arun Gandhi captions the photograph as having been taken circa 1902 in Bombay, Fischer, Brown and Rajmohan Gandhi indicate that the portrait was taken upon their final return to India from South Africa in 1915. None of the biographies have any pictures of Kasturba taken in childhood or adolescence. One encounters her visually only after her marriage to Gandhi, and as Guha points out, only as middle-aged wife and mother of his children. To that extent, it could be argued that her visual identity seems to come into being in the public imagination only after her marriage to Gandhi. Further, the disparate descriptions of Kasturba, as also the differing details of the photographs presented by the biographers of Gandhi and Kasturba, bring to the fore the deeply subjective nature of life-history narratives.

2.3 ‘BA’ TO GANDHI’S ‘BAPU’: THE STEREOTYPICAL IDENTITIES WITHIN WHICH KASTURBA IS REPRESENTED

It could be argued that Kasturba’s identity has been enmeshed with, and exclusively appended to, Gandhi’s persona as the ‘Father of the Nation,’ in the auto/biographical writing that we examine during the course of this study. At the very beginning of her short memoir, Sushila Nayyar describes her first meeting with Kasturba in Punjab in December of 1920, when she had accompanied her mother to meet the Mahatma “following the inauguration of the non-cooperation movement” (Nayyar 11). Nayyar’s older brother, Pyarelal, like “thousands of other young men” had offered himself up to Gandhi’s cause shortly before this meeting, much to the consternation of his widowed mother (11). Nayyar’s mother was unable to meet Gandhi or Pyarelal, but “spent all day talking to Ba” in the hope of “unburdening herself” presumably over the ‘loss’ of this son to the country (11). By the end of the interaction, says Nayyar, when her mother eventually met Gandhi, she was “a different person;” through the day-long conversation during which Kasturba “narrated her own experiences and the hardships she had passed through whilst following her husband’s footsteps in the service of the country,” Nayyar’s mother, who was “deeply impressed” by Kasturba’s words, asked herself, “If Ba could sacrifice so much, why could not she?” (11). In the days following this meeting, says the author, her mother spoke of “Ba’s
wonderful loyalty to her husband,” and her “readiness to face any amount of sacrifice and suffering for his sake,” qualities that she found profoundly admirable (12). Kasturba, in the eyes of Nayyar’s mother, had gone on to “rank with Sita and Savitri,” mythical women in the Hindu canon, celebrated for their forbearance and devotion to their husbands (12). It was also clear to Mrs. Nayyar, that despite the “hard, precarious and stormy future” her son had chosen for himself, he would, at least, have “a mother’s care in his new surroundings” (12).

In the first chapter of his biography of Kasturba, Arun Gandhi, talks about how his grandmother, as a young girl, was schooled in the “oft-told stories about mythic heroines of India’s glorious past” who were essentially “model wives” like Anusaya, “who proved faithful to her husband, a learned and holy man, when her chastity was tested by the gods” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 7). He goes on to list Savitri, “who outwitted the god of death to bring her husband back to life” and “win a kingdom for their children,” followed by Taramati, “the good wife of a virtuous king, who found a way to help her husband keep his vow of truthfulness when he was tested by the gods,” and culminating in Sita, “the beloved wife of the great Lord Rama” among the roster of legendary Hindu symbols of female virtue that Kasturba most likely was taught to valorise (7). Such wifely devotion, as also an overarching mantle of maternal nurturance, has been consistently affixed to Kasturba’s personality by those who have written about her. They become an all-encompassing lens through which she is imagined and represented, even by those who had the opportunity to know her intimately. She is, as the title of the section indicates, compelled into the construct of ‘Ba’ – a universal mother to the fledgling idea of India as a nation, to correspond with the image of her husband as the country’s ‘Bapu’. And yet, such a ‘Ba’ has been brought into existence in the national consciousness entirely owing to the primacy of this ‘Bapu’ – the patriarch, father, and controller of the ideology that shapes the image of the two as a cohesive and complementary unit. Gandhi unequivocally says, by way of an introduction to Nayyar’s memoir on his wife, that the “root cause” for Kasturba’s popularity was “her ability to lose herself in me” (Nayyar 9). While he claims never to have insisted on such “self-abnegation,” Kasturba “bloomed forth and deliberately lost herself in my work” as his “public life expanded” to encompass wider causes and more spiritual ambitions (9). “Indian soil,” he muses “loves this quality most in a wife,” by which he refers to the attempt on Kasturba’s part to “[merge] herself in my activities” (9).

In a chapter titled “Gandhi’s Families” in The Life of Mahatma Gandhi, Louis Fischer discusses the changing and evolving relationship between Gandhi and Kasturba, especially in the wake of the former’s Brahmacharya vow, as they grew into “a model couple,” where she became “the acme of service” and he, “the paragon of consideration” (Fischer 261). Gandhi told Fischer that his wife “takes tea, in spite of the fact that she lives with me” (261).
“She also takes coffee,” which, he announced, he would “lovingly prepare” for her, even though consuming tea and coffee was “rather sinful in Gandhi’s eyes” (261). However, even as Kasturba “retained her personality,” she also achieved a “high degree of self-effacement” (261). Fischer recollects that Kasturba “never behaved like Mrs. Gandhi, never asked privileges for herself, never shirked the hardest work,” and never seemed to be bothered by “the small group of young or middle-aged female disciples who interposed themselves between her and her illustrious husband” (262). The biographer adds that “[b]eing herself and being at the same time a shadow of the Mahatma” made Kasturba “a remarkable woman” (262). That she had, in a sense “come nearer the Gita ideal of non-attachment” than Gandhi had (262). During Gandhi’s fast in the Aga Khan Palace in 1943, Fischer presents an image of a devout but stoic Kasturba as she “knelt before a sacred plant and prayed” when she thought her husband’s death “was near” (486). The sacred plant, to which he refers, is, presumably, the Tulsi, revered in Indian mythology as the consort of Lord Vishnu. When referring to his early years of marriage, Gandhi describes himself as a “jealous” husband, despite his devotion to Kasturba, having caused her tremendous unhappiness owing to his insecurity and suspicion (M. K. Gandhi 21). He says that “only a Hindu wife would tolerate such hardships,” which is why he regards woman as “an incarnation of tolerance” (21). “A servant wrongly suspected,” he goes on to say, “may throw up his job,” while “a son” under the same circumstances “may leave his father’s roof,” not to mention “a friend,” who may “put an end to the friendship” (21). A wife, on the other hand, he continues, “if she suspects her husband,” will “keep quiet;” if the husband suspects her, “she is ruined” (21).

In Mr. Gandhi: The Man, a short memoir, Millie Polak discusses her fond acquaintance with Gandhi during his years in South Africa, especially in the Transvaal, where she had come to know him in her capacity as the wife of Henry Polak, Gandhi’s close associate and friend in his formative years in public service. Gandhi, says Ramachandra Guha, “first began to shed some of his prejudices while living with the Polaks in Johannesburg in 1906” (Guha 534). Unlike Kasturba, who was “brought up to revere and follow her husband,” Millie Polak viewed her husband as a partner, and often had frank and fierce arguments with Gandhi about the patriarchal treatment of women in Indian society (534). These heated exchanges of opinion have been carefully documented in Polak’s memoir, and offer telling insights into Gandhi’s early perceptions of women. During a conversation where Gandhi tries to explain the four different stages (or ashrams) in the life of a Hindu man which culminate in a retirement “from the world and its perplexities” towards a life of “silence for meditation and thought,” Polak asks him about the “position of the woman” in this scheme of things, considering she “never seems to reach a point in Hindu thought where she can lay aside the care of external things” and “devote herself to the life of the spirit” (Polak 32). Gandhi
responds that a woman in Hindu thought, “has no need to retire to the jungle, or to leave
life” in order “to contemplate God,” because “she sees HIM always” (33). The woman, in
Gandhi’s worldview, “has no need of any other school to prepare her for Heaven” than
“marriage to a man and the care of her children” (33). While Millie Polak “acquiesced but
was not convinced,” Kasturba, as a representative of Hindu women, features nowhere
Polak’s narrative regarding the conversation between Gandhi and herself. Whether she
agreed with her husband on this matter, or found greater sympathy in Millie Polak’s
feminist stance, we will never know. However, evidence from the Gandhis’ later life points
towards the first scenario, as Kasturba made an unseen transition from a young, defiant and
often overwhelmed wife of a reformist husband to a more acquiescent companion whose
ostensibly “wonderful self-surrender” galvanised thousands of women to fight for national
independence, even as their own identity remained shackled to that of their husbands
(Guha 522).

Gandhi says that it was the glory of Brahmacharya that helped him realise that “the wife is
not the husband’s bondslave;” rather, she was “his companion and his helpmate,” as an
“equal partner in his joys and sorrows” who was “as free as the husband to choose her own
path” (21). And yet, a few chapters later, he sees himself as Kasturba’s “teacher,” one who
“helped her to make certain reforms” (86). It was, as Rajmohan Gandhi puts it, “with Kastur
consenting to being taught” by her husband, and to “certain reforms,” that the couple
seemed “happy together” (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 57). Rajmohan Gandhi also ref
ers to a conversation between Gandhi and Krishnadass of Orissa about Kasturba in 1921, where
the former tells the latter, “[w]hen [Kasturba] feels thoroughly worn out by hard work, she,
poor thing, neither grumbles nor protests, but simply weeps” (262). This Kasturba
represented nearly four decades into her marriage to Gandhi is a far cry from the spirited,
independent young woman who entered Gandhi’s life as a teenager. During Gandhi’s
twenty-one-day fast for self-purification that was observed in Lady Premlila Thackeray’s
bungalow in Poona in the summer of 1933, Rajmohan Gandhi quotes Gandhi’s faithful
secretary and amanuensis, Mahadev Desai, who credits Kasturba’s “nursing and massaging
and preparing [Gandhi’s] feeds with all her devoted and loving care” as the reason why the
rigorous process was “endured fairly easily by him” (381). The biographer also quotes one of
Gandhi’s young aides, Prabhavati Narayan who recalls an ageing Kasturba’s ability to look
after the youngsters in the Sevagram Ashram, even in the winter. When Prabhavati would
go to Kasturba’s cottage after the “early morning 4 o’clock prayer,” Kasturba would
regularly ask the younger woman to “sleep for some time,” while she proceeded “even in
freezing weather,” to “sweep the room,” “heat water for the bath,” and wake Prabhavati up
only “after the cleaning and dusting were over” (429). During her first visit to Sabarmati
Ashram in the summer of 1929, Sushila Nayyar says she always looked forward to having
breakfast with Kasturba, because she was “so loving and so motherly” (Nayyar 13). Nayyar’s memoirs recollect how Kasturba “talked to me sweetly in her broken Hindustani,” and “looked after my needs” (14). A little later, she describes the “kitchen department” of the ashram, where Kasturba sat each morning, looking “radiant and smiling” having finished “more than her full quota of work,” completing her chores with “amazing agility and neatness” (14).

Nayyar adds that while she never saw Kasturba sitting near her husband, “her watchful eye followed him all the time,” personally ensuring that “all his needs were supplied,” and “those who rendered him various personal services, did so punctually” (14). Kasturba’s participation for the first time in Satyagraha in South Africa in 1913, by courting arrest and suffering harsh imprisonment in order to protest the judgement by Justice Searle which threatened to render non-Christian marriages such as hers as “invalid,” is viewed by Ramachandra Guha as a “mark of deep loyalty to her husband” (Guha 447). In participating in a movement spearheaded by Gandhi, she “underlined her commitment” to their marriage, which, in Guha’s words, had developed into a “relationship of understanding and companionship, to which the word ‘love’ may also be applied” (447-8). Sushila Nayyar echoes this idea in a recollection of Kasturba from 1930, as “a loving older mother” who had transformed into a “soldier of Satyagraha” with “implicit” faith in her husband’s judgement (Nayyar 16). Though Kasturba “did not understand politics,” says Nayyar, “she knew Bapu,” and “the fact that Bapu was leading the fight” was enough for her “to throw herself into it heart and soul” (16). In 1937, when Nayyar went to live at the Sevagram Ashram in Wardha, to look after an ailing Gandhi, she recalls Kasturba’s punishing routine which included supervising “the preparation of Gandhiji’s meal” while also “keeping an eye on the general cooking,” followed by the serving of the meal to her husband and other guests of the ashram, during which she “carried a fan in her hand to keep away the flies and insects,” so that Gandhi could “have his meals and talk to his guests in peace” (19). After the meal, she would follow her husband to his hut and “[rub] his feet as he lay down for his midday rest,” allowing herself some respite only “when he was asleep” (19). In the evening, she would return to the kitchen to prepare “Gandhiji’s meal” and “[attend] to him while he took it,” even as she had long given up “taking a proper meal” at dinnertime herself, limiting her intake to a cup of coffee (19).

Nayyar also recalls Gandhi’s saying of his wife, when she gave up her hut for his use owing to his illness, and slept on the verandah, “I can take away from [Ba] whatever I like, I can cheerfully impose upon her any guests I like, she always bears with me cheerfully and willingly” (21). “[T]hat is as it should be,” adds the patriarch; for “[i]f the husband says one thing and the wife another, life becomes miserable” (21). He concludes, to the merriment of
his wife and others, by saying that in their case, “the husband has only to say a thing and the wife is ready to do it” (21). When Kasturba breathed her last in the Aga Khan Palace in 1944, she was cremated according to a “custom in Maharashtra” reserved for women whose death precedes their husband, wherein “five glass bangles, a coconut and some sesame and barley seeds are tied around her stomach” (Manu Gandhi 8). Despite the scorching heat of the funeral pyre, “all the five green glass bangles had remained undamaged” a testimony to Kasturba’s devotion to her husband, as also her “saintly soul” (8). In response to a condolence letter upon Kasturba’s demise from Lord Wavell, then the Viceroy of India, Gandhi acknowledges his wife’s “strong will” which “enabled her to become quite unwittingly my teacher in the art of nonviolent non-cooperation” (515). He also adds that in the six decades of their marriage they “ceased to be two different entities,” only to qualify that comment yet again with a remark about how Kasturba “chose to lose herself in me” even “without my wishing it” (515). The result, he concludes was that “she truly became my better half” (515). In another letter to a relative, Gandhi refers to Kasturba as the “living image of the virtues of a true Vaishnavi described by Narsinha Mehta in his bhajan” (619). “It is because of her,” he adds, “that I am today what I am” (619). As a “devout Vaishnavi,” Gandhi says, his wife “used to worship the tulsi, religiously observe sacred days and continued to wear the necklace of holy beads right up to her death” (619).

This recurrent image of Kasturba has the classic ‘pativrata,’ an embodiment of female subservience to her patriarchal lord, has been propagated and perpetuated by Gandhi himself, with sufficient help from subsequent biographers, memoirists and chroniclers of the couple. In his introduction to Mukul Kalarthi’s *Ba and Bapu*, Magan Desai says that Gandhi discovered “stri-shakti,” i.e., “the peculiar power – the distinctive virtues and capabilities of a woman” through his marriage to Kasturba, which “enabled him to awaken and activise the women of India” (Kalarthi x). The power and virtues attributed to Kasturba, unfortunately, do not allow the reader to recognise and understand her as a human and flawed woman comprised of multiple, often conflicting facets. Arun Gandhi is of the view that Gandhi has done Kasturba “a disservice” in his autobiographical writings by “his frequent depictions of her as ever meek and submissive” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 52). It is his belief that his grandmother was “never as spineless and long-suffering, as tolerant of abuse, as altogether helpless and desperate” as Gandhi and other biographers would have the reader believe (52). He attributes her ostensible submission to her husband “to the circumstances of her life” and not “to the nature of her temperament” (52). It is also his attempt to destabilise existing stereotypes about Kasturba, and uncover instead, “a woman who did not always have the patience of a saint—or for a saint-in-the making” (87). And yet, in constantly trying to imagine and construct her inner life, and mapping her movement towards emotional and spiritual consonance and mutuality with her husband – a process in
which, he believes she operated with volition and agency, Arun Gandhi presents her more through speculation and conjecture, than he does with substantive evidence to that effect. The inherent sympathy behind the effort is constantly undermined by the paucity of scholarly material to bolster his argument, making the biographical enterprise extremely problematic. The next section will explore how Kasturba’s lack of literacy has impeded representations/constructions of her personality in biographical texts involving Gandhi and her.

2.4 THE ABSENCE OF LITERACY AND AGENCY IN SHAPING KASTURBA’S NARRATIVE

Judith Brown, in her introduction to Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope, points out that Gandhi’s “particular religious stance” enabled him to “open his whole life, including his doubts and agonisings of conscience, to the public gaze” (Brown 3). Brown believes that the Mahatma recognised that anything he wrote or said, especially in later life, was “liable to become public property,” and he “welcomed such exposure” (3). In the process, the situation often arose where a “personal letter” would soon be followed up by “an article in one of his journals,” or “he would discuss a private matter in a public speech” (3). Gandhi wrote and published prolifically; his Collected Works brought out by the Indian government, amounts to no less than a hundred volumes, which Ramachandra Guha calls “a colossal effort of editing and collation that includes tens of thousands of letters, speeches, essays, editorials and interviews that can be reliably attributed to Gandhi” (Guha 4). These writings have been “industriously mined” by Gandhi’s biographers, and their “easy availability,” according to Guha, have ensured, as a result, that Gandhi’s “ideas, campaigns, friendships and rivalries have to come to be seen very largely—and sometimes exclusively—through the prism of his own writings” (4). The same, however, cannot be said about his wife, Kasturbai. In a chapter titled “Playing the Husband” in his autobiography, Gandhi describes his early and adolescent attempts to control his wilful wife, even as they were no more than a pair of “married children” (M. K. Gandhi 10). The young Mohandas wanted to “make” his wife “an ideal wife,” and brimmed with the ambition to “make her live a pure life, learn what I learnt, and identify her life and thought with mine” (10-11). While he admits that Kasturbai was by nature “simple, independent” and “persevering,” she was, unfortunately, in his view, “not impatient of her ignorance” (11). The fact of her husband’s education, therefore, did not “[spur] her to go in for a similar adventure” (11). Devoid of a formal education like most young girls of nineteenth century India, Kasturbai was illiterate. Mohandas was “very anxious to teach her,” but “lustful love left me no time,” says he, and so most of his efforts to “instruct Kasturbai” in their youth “were unsuccessful” (11).
Gandhi claims that he also “failed to teach her through private tutors” (11). As a result, he adds ruefully from the perspective of a middle-aged man in the late 1920s, that Kasturba “can now with difficulty write simple letters and understand simple Gujarati” (11). Had Mohandas’s love for his wife been “absolutely untainted with lust,” he says in retrospect, “she would be a learned lady today” (11). Arun Gandhi suggests that Kasturbai’s early disinterest in education could stem from two reasons: the first being “simple exhaustion” at the end of “long and strenuous” days devoted to housework in a traditional upper caste joint Hindu family, following which she had “neither the stamina nor the inclination to sit through the lessons” her husband had prepared for her; the second reason he offers is that of the three daughters-in-law in the Gandhi household, Kasturbai hailed from “the most prominent and prosperous family,” and feared that if she “learned to read and write,” her sisters-in-law, who were themselves illiterate, might feel she “was trying to prove she was better than they were” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 24). As a result, she could possibly be subjected to their “resentment, ridicule and condemnation” (24). Arun Gandhi adds that Gandhi’s assessment of his failure to educate his wife, does not take into account “Ba’s point of view (25). Further, he says that while Kasturbai never “protested or openly opposed her husband’s wishes” in this regard, she deliberately “chose not to master her lessons” in a “pattern” of quiet defiance that characterised her attempts at self-assertion throughout the couple’s married life (25). As a result of this illiteracy, the young Kasturbai could not read or write letters to her husband in the three years that he lived in London as an apprentice of Law; Mohandas sent messages to his wife and their infant son, Harilal, in letters addressed to his older brother, Lakshmidas (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 35). Guha speculates that when Kasturba moved to Durban with her children and nephew, it must be have been extremely hard for her to find “companionship” of any kind in a strange country (138). While most of her husband’s clients were Gujarati-Muslims, the commonality of a shared language was disrupted by “divergent faiths” which made it difficult for her “to break bread with their wives” (139).

The biographer goes on to say that when the Gandhis decided to return to India in 1901, Kasturba was probably “even keener than her husband to go back to Rajkot, where “the language [she] spoke at home was also the language of the bazaar,” unlike Durban, where she had spent four-and-a-half years “feeling alien and out of place” in a land “they could never call their own” (143). Later, when Gandhi was separated from his family between late 1902 and 1904, he corresponded “mainly with his nephew, Chhaganlal,” in whose care he had left his family in a house in Santa Cruz in Bombay (Guha 153). It was through letters to Chhaganlal, that Gandhi “communicated with Kasturba and the children” (153). While Kasturba could “read Gujarati” with some effort, she was unable to write in the language
“with any fluency,” and so news from her end would be passed on to her husband “by using their nephew as a scribe” (153). A year after Kasturba joined Gandhi with their children in Johannesburg, she also met Millie and Henry Polak, a couple that Gandhi had invited to share their Troyeville house (Polak 14). While Millie Polak, an educated British woman, undertook to give the Gandhi boys “simple English lessons, reading, writing, arithmetic, composition and elementary Grammar,” she says that Kasturba “did not take part in our deliberations” as she “did not speak much English” (14). However, in Millie’s company, Kasturba’s English did improve “in a short time,” and the two women soon “managed to enjoy some kind of intercourse” (14). Over two decades later, when Millie Polak visited the Gandhis in India after their return from South Africa, she recollects, “Mrs. Gandhi had lost some of her English,” but “looked happy in the busy life she led” in the Sabarmati Ashram (138).

The open letters printed in Arun Gandhi’s biography that were published under Kasturba Gandhi’s name—the first addressed to her country’s men and women following Gandhi’s imprisonment in 1922 where she urges them to “wholeheartedly concentrate on the constructive programme,” and the second addressed to her son, Harilal, upon his conversion to Islam in May of 1936—no doubt carry her sentiments, and yet, we are not sure if the language of the text and the nuances within their expression can be ascribed authentically to Kasturba (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 239, 267). To that extent, readers and researchers alike are kept once—often twice—removed from Kasturba’s articulation of her own experiences owing to her inability to read, write and record aspects of her personal history, as also her views on the politics of the time. When Louis Fischer visited Gandhi at the Sevagram Ashram in 1942, his comment about Kasturba not exchanging a word with her husband, automatically offers the premise that she did in fact have conversations with others, none of which have been recorded by him, because her largely monolingual interface with the world possibly prevented an exchange between the Mahatma’s English-speaking biographer and his wife (Fischer 459). The English historian, Judith Brown, all but silences Kasturba’s point of view in her biography on Gandhi, dismissing her, somewhat unjustly, in a short paragraph as “a worry to her eccentric but caring husband,” and also someone who became “cantankerous and difficult to please” with age (Brown 285). Brown further adds that Kasturba “evidently retained many of the family and worldly attachments that Gandhi tried to lay aside,” and that her husband “reluctantly accepted her interference in the ashram life,” even as he was unhappy that “her special tastes in food were pandered to” (286). This information offers a stark contrast to Louis Fischer’s observations on Gandhi and Kasturba, and while we have several comments and letters by Gandhi describing his relationship with his wife, there are none available that can present her side of the story with any claim to accuracy. While Brown is quick to posit that Gandhi’s “concern and
tenderness towards [Kasturba] were very real,” she is equally cautious while acknowledging Kasturba as a valuable ally in the Mahatma’s physical, emotional and spiritual journey, reducing her contribution to a single sentence saying, “[Kasturba] had changed remarkably for an Indian wife” for Gandhi’s sake (286).

Sushila Nayyar recollects the time when Kasturba had visited her in Delhi from Sevagram for medical treatment, in 1939, when she suffered a serious illness (26). Gandhi, says Nayyar, wrote “loving letters” to his wife every day, which would be mailed to Nayyar’s college address (26). Kasturba “brightened up” every time she was brought a letter from her husband (26). She would “have them read out to her first,” and then “keep them under her pillow,” only to put on her glasses and “read them several times herself, deciphering syllable after syllable” (26). An anecdote from Mukul Kalrathi’s Ba and Bapu finds its way into Arun Gandhi’s biography of his grandmother, as also Sushila Nayyar’s memoir on Kasturba. Said to have taken place sometime during Kasturba’s final incarceration in the Aga Khan Palace, this incident offers the reader unflattering insights into her inability to comprehend Gandhi’s attitude towards the British imperialists. “Did I not tell you not to pick up a quarrel with the mighty British empire?” she purportedly asked her husband in a “little ruffled tone” (Kalarthi 123). In return, Gandhi asked her if the two of them should “tender an apology to the government,” to which she replied that things had come to such a pass that “there is no alternative but to suffer” (123). A few days later, she apparently asked him once again why he wanted the British to quit. “Let them remain,” said she, “as ours is a vast country, but, of course, as brothers and not as rulers” (124). Gandhi replied that that was “precisely” what he had been telling them, following which, Kasturba, only a few months before her death, “fully appreciated Bapu’s point of view” and conveyed it faithfully to Sushila Nayyar and later to the Superintendent of the Prison (124). We are given to believe through this episode, then, that Kasturba participated in Gandhi’s ideological experiments with regard to non-violence, Brahmacharya, swadeshi, the constructive programme, the emancipation of women and the amelioration of depressed classes, merely because she had been taught to “revere and follow her husband,” and not because she analysed and understood the inherent political, social or spiritual logic that was their underpinning (Guha 534).

In his autobiography, Gandhi says of his wife, that “though there is a wide difference between us intellectually,” he has always had the feeling that theirs was a “life of contentment, happiness and progress” (M. K. Gandhi 233). This seeming lack of intellectual and ideological consonance between the Gandhis seems further exacerbated in the light of the presence of numerous women friends, colleagues and followers with whom Gandhi had rich and mutually rewarding relationships. In South Africa, he had the chance to interact with Millie Polak, who actively championed the cause of women’s equality, and argued with
her “housemate,” Gandhi, as much as she did with her husband in this regard (Guha 534). “The East has made [woman] the subject of man,” she said to Gandhi in one of her recollections of their Johannesburg years; “she seems to possess no life” (33). When Gandhi replied that women in the East have been given “a position of worship,” and then proceeded to narrate the story of how Savitri “wrestled with the God of Death for the return of her beloved,” Polak retorted that even in Indian mythology, “woman is made to serve man,” to the extent of having to challenge death for her husband (33). While the ostensible worship of women was “beautiful in theory,” she added, it did not reflect in the actuality of life, where Polak found them “always waiting on the pleasure of some man” (34). During his years working in the Transvaal, Gandhi also met Sonia Schlesin, a seventeen-year-old woman of German-Jewish origin, who was first introduced to him by his friend Hermann Kallenbach, and joined Gandhi as a “permanent stenotypist,” soon becoming integral to his core team that managed the Indian satyagraha in South Africa (M. K. Gandhi 237). Schlesin’s courage, says Gandhi, was “equal to her sacrifice,” armed as she was, with “a character as clear as crystal and courage that would shame a warrior” (237). She toiled day and night for the cause, “[venturing] out on errands in the darkness of the night all by herself,” and “angrily scouted any suggestion of an escort” (237). When most of the Indian leadership was in jail, she “led the movement single-handed,” juggling “the management of thousands, a tremendous amount of correspondence, and Indian Opinion” all at once without complaint (237).

Guha says that while Sonia Schlesin “greatly admired Gandhi,” she would not “follow him always or all the way” (Guha 535). He credits Schlesin’s “independence of mind and her physical courage” with enabling Gandhi to see “more clearly the ways in which women could and must take charge of their lives” (535). Gandhi also gained the support of novelist Olive Schreiner, and her brother, W. P. Schreiner, who was “a former prime minister at Cape Colony,” both of whom brought their liberalism and humanism to champion the cause of native Africans and Asiatics in South Africa wholeheartedly, much to Gandhi’s gratitude (Guha 312). On his visit to England in 1909, Gandhi also met Henry Polak’s sister, Maud, who spent months in his company, and on whom he left a lasting impression (358-9). Guha says that Maud’s feelings for Gandhi were “intense, and probably romantic;” his feelings for her, however, “were paternal” (359). Maud was “desperately keen” to accompany Gandhi to South Africa, but Gandhi managed to get Millie Polak to convince her sister-in-law to stay back against the latter’s wishes (359). Henry and Millie Polak appear to have advised Maud to treat her friendship with Gandhi “as a nine weeks’ wonder,” and not “to pursue Gandhi across the oceans” (360). Henry Polak would recall years later, that though Gandhi “was by no means good-looking by Indian standards,” “many notable women were greatly attracted by his personality” throughout his life, and that he “always had women friends, both British
and Indian” (Guha 359). During his brief stay in London with Kasturba for a few months in 1914, en route to India, Gandhi suffered a severe attack of pleurisy, for which he was treated by Dr. Allison. He was visited occasionally by Lady Cecilia Roberts, the wife of Liberal MP, Charles Roberts, with whom Gandhi “became friends” (M. K. Gandhi 299). She attempted to persuade him to try taking malted milk for his condition, which he sampled as a matter of courtesy and immediately declined (299). It was her husband who convinced Gandhi to cut short his stay in Britain and return to India for the sake of his health (300).

In The Good Boatman and Mohandas, Rajmohan Gandhi draws our attention to an extremely significant, albeit short lived relationship in Gandhi’s life, one that might have had a profound impact on his marriage to Kasturba, had his ideas on the matter not been unceremoniously thwarted. In late 1919, Gandhi, who had just turned fifty, first met Sarladevi, the wife of Rambhuj Dutt Chaudhuri, “a man of standing in Lahore,” in whose house he was put up as a guest during his visit to the Punjab (Rajmohan Gandhi, The Good Boatman, 180). Gandhi “found and enjoyed Sarladevi’s company,” and “was attracted by her personality and promise” (180). A niece of Tagore, Sarladevi aged forty-seven, whose husband was incarcerated at the time, served as the editor of his journal, Hindustan (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 229). “An unusually talented singer and writer,” she went on to “train Bengali youth in militant patriotism,” making her inimical to the British (229). Unlike Gandhi and Kasturba who were wed as adolescents, Sarladevi married Rambhuj Dutt Chaudhuri, who was already “twice a widower” at age thirty-three (229). With Sarladevi, Gandhi had not only “overcome his caution regarding exclusive relationships,” but is also said to have contemplated a “spiritual marriage” – the definition of which remains nebulous to this day (230). While her “frame held no lure” for the Mahatma, says Rajmohan Gandhi, Sarladevi “conveyed an aesthetic and political appeal around which Eros too might have lurked” (230). Unlike his illiterate and unsophisticated spouse, Sarladevi was “[c]ultured in both Indian and Western terms” and “wrote and spoke well” (230). She also possibly gave Gandhi the “emotional support,” that he “seldom received but always needed” (230). During his travels in the Punjab, he was often accompanied by Sarladevi, who “spoke and sang at his meetings, wore and championed khadi, and asked the Punjab to absorb the meaning of satyagraha” (231). Between January and May 1920, Gandhi was “clearly dazzled” by Sarladevi’s personality, and “seemed to fantasize that Providence desired them to shape India to a new design” (231). However, Gandhi was reined in by the likes of Devadas, Mahadev Desai, C. Rajagopalachari, and Gandhi’s grand-nephew Mathuradas Trikamji, among others, and put an end to the relationship in June 1920, leaving Sarladevi shattered – a break he would liken in later recollections to being “freed from a trance” (Rajmohan Gandhi, The Good Boatman, 181).
In India, Gandhi had several female followers, ashramites and disciples like Mirabehn, Amrit Kaur, Sushila Nayyar, and Prabhavati Narayan among others. Mirabehn, formerly called Madeleine Slade, the daughter of an English admiral, was thirty-three when she joined the Sabarmati Ashram, inspired by a book on Gandhi by Romain Rolland, and dedicated herself to Gandhi’s ideals (Rajmohan Gandhi, *Mohandas*, 302). Described as “tall, authoritative and plain,” as also “enthusiastic and musical,” Mira came to occupy a one-room hut close to Gandhi and spent a long period of her life being a “helper, ally—and disciple” to the Mahatma (303). In the process, she “Indianised” herself, and wore “a khadi salwar and kameez,” in addition to which she “learnt to spin, speak Hindustani and clean lavatories” (302). Mira and Sarojini Naidu were the female associates who accompanied Gandhi to London to attend the second Round Table Conference in July of 1931, even as Kasturba stayed behind (Fischer 351). When she and Kasturba were incarcerated together in Sabarmati Prison, Mira served as Kasturba’s letter writer, conveying her messages to Gandhi, and his to her (Rajmohan Gandhi, *Mohandas*, 380). Mira was among those who were arrested and imprisoned in the Aga Khan Palace with Gandhi and Kasturba, and was with the latter through her last days. Judith Brown says that Gandhi “seems to have gained much of his genuine emotional sustenance” from such “relationships with mature women who co-operated in his constructive work, treated him as an honoured guest in their family homes, visited his ashram, and dedicated themselves to his welfare” (Brown 287). She describes the “pattern of relationships” as “not uncommon around ‘sainthood’ celibates,” and adds that while the women found “a new fulfilment in the tender concern” that Gandhi would show them, as also in the “public work” he demanded of them, he found “companionship and service” in return (287). One such relationship she discusses is that of Gandhi with Amrit Kaur, “A Punjabi Christian of high birth and good education,” who became “a colleague, amanuensis and companion” in Gandhi’s later years in Sevagram (286). Gandhi, says Brown, would call Kaur an “idiot,” even as she in turn would address him as “tyrant,” and his letters to her were “tender, didactic and demanding” (287).

Gandhi would chide Amrit Kaur for “overwork and illness,” and even suggested that her “constant colds” were caused by private habits like “wearing silk underwear, taking frequent baths, and ‘the criminal use of soap’ which destroyed natural protective oil on the face” (Brown 287). While Kasturba was “special” in Gandhi’s inner circle, she was “not perhaps critical to it,” says Rajmohan Gandhi, and had learnt to “tolerate other women sharing the space and chores around Gandhi, and grew close herself to some of them” (Rajmohan Gandhi, *Mohandas*, 434). We will never fully comprehend her perspective on these aspects of her husband’s life, because Kasturba remains represented, if not entirely constructed, in third person by those who interacted with her, and offered oral, anecdotal insights into her persona. She participated vigorously in Gandhi’s satyagraha campaigns, mortified her body
with the same zeal as her husband did his, made numerous personal and material sacrifices, fighting social taboos in addition to courting imprisonment several times, but her voice remains muted, and her presence as a political ally to Gandhi remains eclipsed in biographical literature on him. Her literary and cinematic image suffers from a crushing lack of agency, and what we receive, by way of representation/construction is a flimsy and fledgling persona, her narrative subdued and often effaced owing to paucity of personal records. In a letter to an individual expressing unhappiness with his partner sometime after Kasturba’s demise, Gandhi asked, “Don’t you know that I was a barrister and Ba was almost illiterate?” “And yet,” he adds, “whatever progress I have been able to make in my life today is all due to my wife” (Rajmohan Gandhi 655). Kasturba resumed her education in the penultimate year of her life, in incarceration, with her husband serving as tutor once again, teaching her “Gujarati, [the] Gita, geography, and sometimes history,” with the seventy-three-year-old pupil studying the subjects “with the enthusiasm and eagerness of a young student,” even occasionally expressing regret over not having “taken to studies earlier” (Nayyar 36). A touching anecdote of her last attempts at receiving instruction will be discussed in the forthcoming chapter, which deals with the domestic universe of the Gandhis over the six decades of their marriage.
CHAPTER III
PUBLIC VS PRIVATE:
AN ANALYSIS OF KASTURBA AND GANDHI’S DOMESTIC UNIVERSE

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will focus on the domestic universe of Mohandas and Kasturba Gandhi; starting with their life as an adolescent couple in Rajkot; moving through their years in Durban; their brief return to India in 1901; followed by another long spell in Johannesburg; after which they returned to India to set up base first in Gujarat and later in Wardha. It will also analyse Kasturba’s last two years spent in incarceration at the Aga Khan Palace in Poona with her husband, in a uniquely domestic set-up that included its own routines, rituals and familial camaraderie. It is important to scrutinise such domestic spaces, especially in the context of Gandhi and Kasturba as represented in auto/biographical texts, because it gives us an opportunity to examine the dynamics of power between the couple, in an arena that was, in its time, distinctly and tacitly accepted as a woman’s domain. More importantly, it is an area in which Gandhi conducted some of his most strenuous and challenging experiments, in a bid to ensure that his personal life unequivocally supported and propelled his more publicly spiritual and political ambitions. It also offers the researcher insights into the evolution of their relationship from young man and wife ensconced in a traditional Hindu upper caste joint family all the way to their journey into communal and ashram life, where, in addition to abjuring notions of caste based and religious segmentation, they also actively culled out any potential for physical, material or emotional exclusivity, expanding their familial horizons to encompass the nation as a whole. It will also enable us to map the numerous changes that Kasturba underwent over six decades of marriage and the manifestly peripatetic nature of the couple’s life, as they moved houses, modified their lifestyle, raised children, fought numerous bouts of illness; forged lifelong friendships with people of other castes, religious proclivities, language, countries, and political ideologies; travelled across continents; and fought a non-violent battle for India’s independence against the British.

3.2 REPRESENTATIONS OF THE EARLY YEARS OF THE GANDHI MARRIAGE (1882—94)

Gandhi was in his mid-fifties when he began writing The Story of My Experiments with Truth, in which he says that he can see “no moral argument in support of such a preposterously early marriage” in reference to his wedding to Kasturbai when they were no more than “two
innocent children” who had “unwittingly hurled themselves” at age thirteen into “the ocean of life” (M. K. Gandhi 7,9). Mohandas, it appears, had been betrothed twice before in his young life, before he was engaged to Kasturbai at the age of seven, following the deaths of the two little girls who had been chosen for him earlier (7). On the day of his wedding, everything seemed “right, proper and pleasing” to him, and he was full of “eagerness” to get married (9). His brother’s wife, he says, “had thoroughly coached me about my behaviour on the first night;” however, he does not know if his wife had been similarly prepared to meet the shock of intimacy with a stranger (9). “I have never asked her about it” he admits, “nor am I inclined to do so now” (9). The youngsters in Gandhi’s recollections of the time “gradually began to know each other,” and also, “to speak freely together,” and soon enough, the young Mohandas began to assume “the authority of a husband” (9). Kasturbai, as per tradition, followed a few weeks after the wedding to her new husband’s house in Rajkot, “a two–storey building known as ‘Kaba Gandhi no Delo’” with many rooms, “but a single kitchen” where the Gandhi kin lived within a “traditional joint family set-up” (Guha 127). Following strict notions of piety, vegetarianism, purity and pollution, the family was headed by Karamchand (Kaba) Gandhi, who was then the Dewan to the Thakore of Rajkot, and his wife, Putliba, who was a woman “of self-sacrificing discipline and a stoic religiosity” (23). Interestingly, in a small subversion of the conventional patriarchal establishment that the Gandhi household clearly embodied, Kaba Gandhi “would help his wife cut and clean the vegetables in preparation for the evening meal” (23). Kasturbai was the youngest of the three daughters-in-law to enter the Gandhi home, married as she was to the youngest son of the family.

Gandhi’s early marriage was sustained, according to Louis Fischer, by “the ancient Indian institution of the joint family,” where “parents and their children and their sons’ wives and children, sometimes thirty or more persons altogether, lived under one roof,” and so newlywed adolescents like Mohandas and Kasturbai had no worry about having to find “home, furniture, or board” (Fischer 29). In such households, says Arun Gandhi, “young husbands and wives must ignore each other during daylight hours,” as “any show of affection” or even “the exchange of a few casual words” in the presence of the elders of the family, “was considered indecent” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 19). As a teenager, Gandhi pored over pamphlets on “conjugal love, thrift, child marriage and other subjects,” in which he encountered messages on “[l]ifelong faithfulness to the wife,” that were “permanently imprinted” on his heart (M. K. Gandhi 10). The young Mohandas, in pledging loyalty to Kasturbai, soon expected to “exact faithfulness” from his wife in turn, making him a “jealous husband” (10). He would be “for ever on the look-out regarding her movements,” and Kasturbai was informed that she “could not go anywhere” without her husband’s permission, which “sowed the seeds of a bitter quarrel” between the two (10). The
restraint, says Gandhi, in hindsight, was “virtually a sort of imprisonment” on the independent Kasturbai, who “made it a point to go out whenever and wherever she liked” (10). The more Mohandas attempted to contain his young wife’s spirit, the more “liberty” she took, as a result of which “refusal to speak to one another became the order of the day” (10). Gandhi admits to have been “passionately fond” of Kasturbai – a passion that he wanted “to be reciprocated” by her (11). As was the case with child brides of the time, Kasturbai spent a good deal of her early married years in her “own natal home,” owing to what Judith Brown calls “a kindly custom which eases the young bride’s transition to her new status as wife and most junior daughter-in-law in a household of strangers” (Brown 19). When in her husband’s house, Kasturbai asserted her independence by “running without Mohan’s permission to friends and relatives in the neighbourhood, refusing to be taught English and arithmetic by Mohan, and shaming him by her natural courage (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas 8).

While Mohandas was afraid of the darkness, imagining “ghosts coming from one direction, thieves from another, and serpents from a third,” his brave young partner “knew no fear of serpents or ghosts,” and “could go out anywhere in the dark” without any anxiety (M. K. Gandhi 17-18). Arun Gandhi’s account of his grandmother’s life at this time says that when Gandhi resumed his studies in high school, “Kasturbai was not idle during the day” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 19). As the youngest daughter-in-law of the family, she considered it her duty “to perform without a murmur of protest, whatever tasks the older women might assign to her” (19). As the prime minister of Rajkot, Karamchand Gandhi entertained “a daily stream of visitors” who had to be attended to by the women of the family, “serving tea, snacks, or full meals, depending on what time they came to visit” (20). The patriarch of the family, though politically powerful, had not saved up enough to live lavishly, as a result of which the Gandhi household “did not have the army of servants and cooks that one might have expected to find in the home of a minister of state” (20). Around this time, Mohandas, who “envied bigger, stronger boys,” made the acquaintance of Sheikh Mehtab, an older schoolmate “who could run great distances with remarkable speed,” and was “spectacular in the long and high jump as well” (Fischer 31). Mehtab, whose exploits “dazzled” Mohandas, initiated him into experiments with non-vegetarian food, which was considered an absolute taboo in the latter’s upper caste, orthodox Vaishnava lifestyle (31). Arun Gandhi says that Kasturbai was “distressed” by Mehtab’s presence in her husband’s life, and “took it upon herself to warn Mohandas against spending too much time with Mehtab,” but her advice was disregarded (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 26). There is, however, no indication of such a conversation in Gandhi’s autobiography or any of the other biographies that discuss Mohandas’s friendship with Mehtab. The overzealous new companion also took Gandhi to a brothel, “a den of vice” as Gandhi himself called it, where he was “struck blind and dumb”
(M. K. Gandhi 20). When he sat “tongue-tied” beside the sex worker, she showed him the door “with abuses and insults,” much to his embarrassment and humiliation (20). Gandhi also holds Mehtab responsible for having “fanned the flame of my suspicions about my wife” as a result of which he “pained [Kasturbai] by acting on his information” (20).

Soon, Mohandas, with an unnamed cousin also began stealing “coppers from the servant’s pocket money” to buy and smoke cigarettes; the two also decided to consume “Dhatura seeds” to commit suicide, but our courage failed us” at the last minute (22). At age fifteen, Mohandas also stole “a bit of gold out of my meat-eating brother’s armlet,” but confessed to his crime through a letter to his father in which he sought the latter’s forgiveness (23). Karamchand Gandhi, by this time, was suffering from a fistula and was confined to his bed. He read the note, and wept; the “pearl-drops [trickling] down his cheeks” cleansed Mohandas’s heart “and washed my sin away” (24). Decades later, Gandhi expressed contrition in his autobiography for his actions towards his wife during the formative years of their marriage, saying that it was *Ahimsa* that taught him that a wife must be a man’s “companion and helpmate, and an equal partner in his joys and sorrows – as free as the husband to choose her own path;” however, we have no record of whether he had any conversation with Kasturbai at the time articulating his shame and remorse (21). Patriarchy as an institution probably instilled in the then callow and unthinking youth a reverence for his father’s primacy in the family, while compelling him to subject his wife to his insensitivity and persistent insecurity. Once again, we have no records of Kasturbai’s personal recollections in this regard, leaving her actions and responses to the situation entirely inscrutable. Gandhi took on the responsibility of nursing his father, his duties including “dressing the wound, giving my father his medicine, and compounding drugs whenever they had to be made up at home” (24). Kasturbai, also aged fifteen, was in the final weeks of her first pregnancy at this time. Gandhi recalls how every night, “when my hands were busy massaging my father’s legs,” his mind was “hovering about the bed-room” where his wife awaited him at the end of the day (24). In a well-documented incident, Mohandas who was relieved from his nursing duties one night by a visiting uncle, went to his bedroom, and awoke his heavily pregnant sleeping wife for “a bout of lovemaking,” when a servant informed the couple of Kaba Gandhi’s death (Guha 29).

The circumstances of his father’s demise, says Brown, “grievously underlined Gandhi’s existing tendency towards guilt,” and “almost certainly affected his attitude towards sexuality in later life” (Brown 21). Gandhi refers to it as the “shame of my carnal desire even at the critical hour of my father’s death, which demanded wakeful service” (M. K. Gandhi 26) Kasturbai’s baby, born a few days after Karamchand’s passing, “scarcely breathed for more than three or four days” compounding Gandhi’s shame (26). When Mohandas was
studying for a B. A. Degree in Samaldas College in Bhavnagar, upon the completion of his matriculation examination, he was advised by Mavji Dave, a “shrewd and learned Brahman,” who was also an “old friend and adviser of the family,” to go to London and study to become a barrister (30). The prospect of an upper caste man of their community travelling across the seas for what could be a potentially polluting experience of the West, enraged the members of the Modh Vania sect to which Mohandas belonged, and they excommunicated him, turning his entire family including Kasturba and their newborn son, Harilal, into outcasts (Fischer 36). Becharji Swami, a Jain monk, administered an oath to Mohandas, who “vowed not to touch wine, woman or meat” following which, Putliba “voiced, or gestured, her permission” to her youngest son (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 22). Funding an English education was an expensive affair, and at some point, Mohandas even suggested “the disposal of my wife’s ornaments, which could fetch two to three thousand rupees” (M. K. Gandhi 33). His brother, Laxmidas, however, “promised to find the money somehow” (33). Kasturba, says Rajmohan Gandhi, “does not feature in these discussions about her husband’s plans, even though they will make a large difference to her” (22). “Like most Indian wives of her times and of later times,” he continues, “she is expected to accept what her husband (and mother-in-law) decide” (22). Gandhi himself mentions no conversation with Kasturba where he sought her advice or assent in the matter in his autobiography. Over the three years that Mohandas spends in London, we learn nothing of her at all. While he admits that his “mother’s love haunted” him, as he spent many initial nights with “tears [streaming] down his cheeks” flooded by “home memories of all sorts” which rendered him sleepless and miserable, he makes no specific reference to his wife in this regard; whether out of the need to shelter that private equation from the prying eyes of the audience, or merely because Kasturba was not part of those emotional memories we will never know (M. K. Gandhi 38).

Arun Gandhi says that in the wake of the family’s changing fortunes, and Mohandas’s crushingly expensive education, the burden of which was borne by Laxmidas, Kasturba “had to forget the ways of her comfortable girlhood,” and tried to make “whatever small savings she could” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 42). He also mentions that she made “regular visits” to her parents’ house in Porbandar, even at the cost of “disobeying caste injunctions” (40). Mohandas disembarked in Bombay in late 1891, having completed his training, to be informed by his brother that their mother “had died a few months previously” (Guha 55). He had returned home “law degree in hand, and without ever having had meat, alcohol or sex in London,” but he “could not tell his mother of those achievements” (55). Judith Brown views the later development of Gandhi’s “self-image as a caring public servant, his identification with women and willing performance of female roles such as nursing and tending children, as well as his withdrawal from male sexual activity” as a reflection, at least
in part of the “still powerful mother figure in his life, rendered the more potent by her death” (Brown 27). After placating his fellow Modh Vanias by taking a “purificatory swim” in the Godavari river, followed by which he “hosted a dinner” for the prominent members of his community in Rajkot, he set about trying to gain a foothold into law practice in the city (Guha 57). About his reunion with Kasturbai after three long years of separation, Gandhi has little to say except that their mutual relations “were still not as I desired” and that his long stay in England “had not cured me of jealousy” (M. K. Gandhi 76). He attempted to educate her once again, but his attempts were soon thwarted by lust. The couple also quarrelled often, and Gandhi claims to have sent her away to her father’s house for a long spell, “[consenting] to receive her back” only after he had made her “thoroughly miserable” (76). Three years of exposure to Western culture had also informed Mohandas’s sensibilities, and he felt the need to initiate what he then perceived as “food reform” even at home in Rajkot (77). His brother, Laxmidas, thought he should welcome Mohandas “into a more English atmosphere at home,” by purchasing crockery for everyday use (Brown 27). Gandhi also “added his customary oatmeal porridge to the changes,” and cocoa “became an item in housekeeping,” even as he “continued to wear European dress” (27).

With regard to Kasturbai, says Brown, “the old patterns re-emerged,” where Mohandas continued to be “jealous, suspicious and domineering, both physically and mentally” (27-28). Soon upon his return to India, Kasturbai was pregnant with another child. Gandhi’s lifestyle proved to be expensive to keep up, and opportunities for work in Rajkot thin. On the advice of friends, Mohandas moved to Bombay, where he “started a household with a cook as incompetent as myself” (M. K. Gandhi 77). In what would later be viewed as a precursor to his reformist zeal, he did not treat the Brahman cook “as a servant,” but “as a member of the household” (77). Gandhi claims that he did “half the cooking myself,” introducing “English experiments in vegetarian cookery,” as he went along (78). Kasturbai and Harilal continued to live in the family house in Rajkot. Neither Gandhi’s autobiography, nor any of the other biographies under scrutiny in this study account for her life in this period. “Failing to find regular work in Bombay,” however, Gandhi soon returned to Rajkot, where he “drafted petitions” regarding land disputes on behalf of clients, which brought him an income of Rs. 300 a month, “adequate to maintain his family,” which had expanded following the birth of his second son, Manilal, in October of 1892 (Guha 63). Mohandas’s life with Kasturba, up unto this point is punctuated by frequent separations; periods during which we are compelled to recognise a development in his character, a growing independence, an interest in religion and vegetarianism as a philosophy, a fastidiousness that drives him to participate in domestic affairs, even as he toys with various kinds of social reform. It is interesting to note, however, that paucity of information does not afford us any insights into Kasturba’s world during this time. She is a product of a patriarchal family, and is
married into an equally traditional and orthodox patriarchal set-up, where she has neither choice nor agency as a woman. She remains in the shadows, presumably as a wife and daughter-in-law, relegated to sundry household chores, and the reproductive and child rearing aspects of domesticity, activities that occupy no space in the auto/biographies under examination here. Gandhi, on the other hand, makes a transition from insecure school-going teenager to fledgling England-returned breadwinner, even as we see him make forays into experiments with running a domestic establishment, which will be explored further in the next section.

3.2 REPRESENTATIONS OF THE GANDHI HOUSEHOLD(S) IN SOUTH AFRICA (1895-1915)

When Mohandas left for South Africa in 1893 to serve on the legal team of Dada Abdulla in Durban and Pretoria, he “felt the pang of parting” with Kasturba (M. K. Gandhi 85). In the few months before his departure, their marital troubles had reduced considerably. Though “our love could not yet be called free from lust,” says Gandhi in retrospect, “it was gradually getting purer” (86). When Gandhi’s stay in South Africa was extended from one to three years, he thought it fit to bring his wife and children to live with him in late 1896. Upon the amicable settlement of Dada Abdulla’s legal affairs, Mohandas began residing in Durban “in a house of his own, in the central locality of Beach Grove” (Guha 97). The house was “quite spacious, extending over two storeys, with a verandah and also a little garden;” with “sparse” living room furniture, a “bookcase with pamphlets on vegetarianism mixed with the Koran, the Bible, Hindu texts, and the works of Tolstoy” (Guha 97). “Food was simple,” says Gandhi of this time; he used to invite English friends and Indian co-workers, and so “the housekeeping bills were always high” (M. K. Gandhi 134). While Mohandas recognised that “a good servant is essential to every household,” he had “never known how to keep anyone as a servant,” as a result of which, he had “a friend as companion and help” and a cook “who had become a member of the family” (135). The friend, to whom he refers, was Vincent Lawrence, a Tamil man from Madras “who served as his clerk” (Guha 97). In addition, he also had “office clerks boarding and lodging” in his house (M. K. Gandhi 135). When he returned to Rajkot to make plans to go back accompanied by Kasturbai, Harilal, Manilal, and Gandhi’s sister’s son, Gokaldas; Gandhi also “had to decide what dress and kind of life they should adopt abroad” (Brown 37). Analysing his sartorial choice at the time, decades later, Gandhi says that “in order to look civilised, our dress and manners had, as far as possible, to approximate the European standard,” in order that they could have “some influence,” without which, “it would not be possible to serve the [Indian] community” (155). The choice would be determined by him, because, as was the case with most child
marriages, he believed that “a wide gulf” separated him from Kasturbai, owing to her lack of literacy and his Western education. He, therefore, had to be “his wife’s teacher” even in this respect (155).

As the Parsis were known to be the “most civilised people amongst Indians,” Gandhi ensured that Kasturbai “wore the Parsi sari,” and his children, “the Parsi coat and trousers” (155). Though Kasturbai and the boys “submitted to his authority,” says Judith Brown, they found “getting used to wearing shoes and stockings a sore trial,” for their feet “became painful,” and their stockings “stank from perspiration” causing them great discomfort (Brown 37). In his autobiography, Gandhi, with characteristic candour, acknowledges that while his family’s objections to the choice of dress were answered, it was “the force of [his] authority” as the family patriarch that facilitated compliance, and not sound reason (M. K. Gandhi 155). It was in the same spirit, he says, “and with even more reluctance” that they adopted “the use of knives and forks,” although, as per custom, they were hitherto used to eating with their hands (155). Kasturbai Gandhi and the three boys came to live in Gandhi’s Beach Grove villa in Durban. Ramachandra Guha points out that it was here that “for the first time in fifteen years of their marriage” that they lived as a “nuclear family” with ‘Kasturbai’ making the transition to ‘Kasturba,’ the matriarch of this new arrangement “in sole charge of her kitchen and of her boys too” (Guha 128). In the raising of the children, Gandhi clearly took all the key decisions, particularly with regard to education. While his contacts would have secured the boys “places in the best European schools,” Gandhi rejected the idea on principle, as “other Indian children were not admitted there” (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 90). Further, he decided against “schools for Indian children run by missionaries,” which he believed to be of “indifferent quality,” in addition to which they “taught no Gujarati, and seemed likely to indoctrinate pupils in Christianity” (91). Gandhi hired an English governess, despite which “the schooling of Harilal and Manilal and their cousin Gokul was overall a dismal affair” (91). When the governess proved unsuccessful, Mohandas decided to teach the children at home, “conducting lessons in their native Gujarati,” much to the distress, says Arun Gandhi, of Kasturba, because her husband was “far too busy to devote enough time to the project” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 85).

The fact that Gandhi had chosen to live “not in the Indian ghetto in central Durban,” but in Beach Grove, on the city’s outskirts“ placed the family in a locality occupied by men “who were British by blood as well as in spirit,” which posed serious problems for Kasturba (Guha 139). As an outsider to the culture of Durban, she spoke no English, and came from a tradition that “forbade her from talking to white people” (140). The Gujarati women with whom she could have socialised lived too far away, and her husband was too preoccupied with work to be available to her as much as she would have liked. As a result, she “retreated
further into her home,” where her children “provided her with both company and consolation” (140). When Kasturba was pregnant with Ramdas, her third son, she got into a well-known skirmish with her husband over the cleaning of Vincent Lawrence’s chamber pot at the villa. Lawrence, Gandhi’s clerk, was an untouchable who had converted to Christianity “to escape the ugly disabilities” which Hinduism imposed on his caste (Fischer 82). Gandhi in his reformist zeal had refused to employ an outsider to perform, what has been viewed, traditionally, in upper caste Hindu households, as a menial task, and decided it was up to him or Kasturba to empty the pots that had not been cleaned, and return them to their rooms. However, to Kasturba’s inherently caste Hindu sensibility, Lawrence, despite his conversion to Christianity, was a Panchama – a man of lower birth, whose chamber pot she was indoctrinated into believing was wrong to touch. When she protested, she went up against an intractable and angry husband who “caught her by the hand, dragged the helpless woman to the gate” and opened it with the “intention of pushing her out” of the house altogether (M. K. Gandhi 232). Kasturba, in turn, shamed Mohandas by asking him where she could go, if he threw her out with no relatives or friends to “harbour” her in the face of such violence and expulsion (232). Gandhi’s autobiography speaks of the episode with penitential reverence for his wife’s endurance in the face of his unyielding principles, and says that the incident occurred at a time when he thought that “the wife was the object of the husband’s lust, born to do her husband’s behest,” rather than “a helpmate, a comrade and a partner in the husband’s joys and sorrows” (232).

Around the time of Kasturba’s delivery, she insisted that there be an Indian nurse on hand to help her with the newborn (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 88). Gandhi himself studied “the things necessary for safe labour,” poring over “Dr. Tribhuvandas’ book, Ma-ne Shikhaman,” or “Advice to a Mother” to equip himself with valuable information and instructions on the nursing of his children (M. K. Gandhi 170). Gandhi was present “to assist the doctor” during the birth of Ramdas, and when Kasturba suffered severe anaemia following childbirth, Gandhi took charge of looking after the mother and infant, in addition to which he also “bathed and fed and cared for the older boys” in the house (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 88). Two years later, the birth of his youngest child, Devadas, put Gandhi “to the severest test,” when Kasturba went into labour suddenly, and there was no time to fetch either a doctor or a midwife at short notice (M. K. Gandhi 170). Gandhi saw Kasturba through the delivery himself with no outside assistance, and says of the experience in his autobiography, that he was “not nervous,” a rare feat for a man with no formal medical training even in the twenty-first century (170). Gandhi had also, during this time, begun to “cut down expenses” in a bid to move towards a simpler life (177). When the washerman’s bill grew “heavy,” Gandhi purchased “a washing outfit,” along with “a book on washing” which he studied, and taught it also to Kasturba (177). The chore of washing clothes, he admits, “added to my work,” but
“its novelty made it a pleasure,” he says in conclusion (177). How Kasturba felt about this added burden to household work, has not been discussed in Gandhi’s autobiography; Arun Gandhi says that Mohandas’s dismissal of household servants, and his decision to involve all the members of the family, including the children, in domestic chores, was only perceived by Kasturba “as a way of bringing the family closer” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 90). When Mohandas was “contemptuously” turned down by a barber in Pretoria, he “immediately purchased a pair of clippers and cut my hair before the mirror,” and, over a period of time, cut the hair of his four sons (M. K. Gandhi 178).

When the Gandhis decided to return to India in 1901, they were given a farewell party by their Indian brethren in Durban. As a token of appreciation for his selfless public service to the Indian community in South Africa, Gandhi was given several costly presents including “a gold necklace for [Kasturba], other gold chains, gold watches” and “diamond rings” (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 96). Gandhi felt the need to return the gifts, even if they were ostensibly for his wife or his children, because, to his mind, they were “being trained to a life of service” and to “an understanding that service was its own reward” (M. K. Gandhi 184). More interestingly, he decided to employ his children in assisting him with the task of convincing their mother of the wisdom of his decision. The ensuing argument between Gandhi and Kasturba, which finds rich documentation in the biographies under examination, will be read into more closely in the forthcoming chapter. But despite her disagreements, Gandhi ensured that the expensive gifts were put into a trust deed and “deposited in a bank” for the future use of “the service of the community” (185). Though Gandhi says, that in the years that went by since the incident, Kasturba, too, “[saw] its wisdom,” we have no concrete evidence to prove that she understood or wholeheartedly supported her husband’s philosophy, and did not merely accept it as a devoted wife (185). Upon the family’s return to India, Gandhi and Kasturba took up residence with the four boys in a house in Girgaum in Bombay. Of this period we have little information, except with regard to an incident where their second son, Manilal came down with “a severe attack of typhoid combined with pneumonia,” during which Gandhi went through “great torment” as he nursed his son, “giving him Kuhne hip baths” which he had studied about, having rejected the doctor’s plea to give the patient “eggs and chicken broth” as that went against the family’s dietary restrictions, preferring to give him orange juice instead (Rajmohan Gandhi 100). On an evening when Manilal grew delirious, Mohandas gave him a “moist sheet pack,” wrapping the boy in a wet sheet, and covering him with two blankets, while applying “a wet towel” to his head (100). Manilal’s body burned “like hot iron,” and was “quite parched,” with “absolutely no perspiration” (M. K. Gandhi 207). “Sorely tired,” Gandhi left Manilal in Kasturba’s care and went out for a walk; upon his return, he found that Manilal’s fever had
broken, and the young boy grew steadily better in his father’s care (100). Once again, however, we have no concrete information on the episode from Kasturba’s point-of-view.

Kasturba’s illiteracy probably ensured that she “acquiesced in his medical experiments,” but as Judith Brown points out, Gandhi’s “growing alienation from modern medicine and increasing reliance on natural methods of healing,” especially in situations when the health of his family members was at risk, called for “considerable courage” on her part and that of the boys (Brown 40). It was Gandhi who helmed the decision to move his family from the Girgaum house to a bungalow in Santa Cruz, deeming the former “not habitable” owing to the fact that it was “damp and ill-lighted” (M. K. Gandhi 208). While he consulted Revashankar Jagjivan on localities to look for residences, it is unclear if Kasturba was part of this discussion. Kasturba, we are told, did actively decide to stay back in Bombay in the company of Gandhi’s nephew, Chhaganlal and his wife, Kashiben, when Gandhi set sail once again for South Africa at the end of 1902 (Guha 150). Arun Gandhi says that his grandmother was “blissfully content” during her time in Santa Cruz (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 107). He maintains that Kasturba was a traditionalist “by training, by habit and by temperament,” and yet, she “enjoyed talking with people and making new friends” in the Bombay suburb, and was “quite comfortable going places on her own or with friends” (107). He also emphasises that she “liked being mistress of her own home,” and was far more at ease in Bombay than she had been in Durban, surrounded as she was in the metropolis by “Gujarati-speaking Hindus from the Kathiawar region of India,” unlike the white, English-speaking neighbours she was surrounded by in Beach Grove (107). Not only was she not comfortable with a language and culture she considered alien to her way of life, but in entertaining foreign visitors in Durban, she had also been compelled, at Gandhi’s request, to stop observing “many of the strict norms of eating, drinking, washing, bathing, cleaning, not wearing shoes inside the house” which were “like second nature to her” and other upper caste Hindu women of her time (107). She is said to have confided about her misgivings and guilt over such caste transgressions in South Africa, in her sister-in-law, Nandkunwerben, who apparently told her that as long as she was a “good wife,” she could do “many things that are forbidden by dogma,” an idea that, in Arun Gandhi’s view, she found “in an odd sort of way, liberating” (108).

During the time of his separation from his wife and children, Gandhi had settled down in Johannesburg, where he met Henry Polak, who introduced him to John Ruskin’s Unto this Last, which inspired Gandhi to purchase land and establish the Phoenix settlement, with contributions from the Durban merchant, Parsee Rustomjee, from where he hoped to run Indian Opinion, a publication he had set up to air the voices of the Indian community in South Africa (176). When Kasturba arrived in Johannesburg in late 1904, with three of her
sons (the eldest staying back to complete his matriculation from a boarding school in Gondal, much against his father’s wishes) and two nephews, she had to adjust to a new household, this time a rented house in Albermarle Street, in “the east Johannesburg district of Troyeville” living yet again in “the only Indian home in a white neighbourhood” (178). This was a “two-storey house” which was “spacious, with eight rooms, balconies and a garden” (178). Kasturba, says Ramachandra Guha, was duly warned by her husband that “he would spend little time with her in Johannesburg,” and so the couple seemed to follow a routine where Gandhi “rose early, helped his wife grind flour for the day’s meals,” and then walked to his office, carrying a “packed lunch of wholemeal bread with peanut butter and a selection of seasonal fruits;” he would return in the evening, where, after dinner, he “taught his sons the elements of Gujarati grammar and composition” (178). “Everyone,” says Brown, “regardless of age or sex, began to contribute physical labour to the running of the household,” as the lifestyle of the Gandhis became “more simple and self-reliant,” at the patriarch’s behest (Brown 42). The children of the house, in addition to assisting in the grinding of the flour each day, also helped with “the general cleaning work, including that of the lavatories,” receiving, in the process, an inclusive and “practical education,” which was “totally at variance with that of the average Indian bania child who would have learned that manual labour was degrading” (42). Yet again, we have no sense of how Kasturba felt about her sons being raised in a manner that was so profoundly defiant of the gender and caste values into which she had been socialised since birth. By this time, the Gandhi household had come to include his close associate and friend, Henry Polak, who married Millie Graham Polak, bringing her from England to live with the family in Johannesburg in early 1906.

Millie Polak offers first hand glimpses of the “very busy” life of the distinctly heterogeneous domestic unit in her memoirs of the time (Polak 16). First thing in the morning, she says, “all the male members of the household” would assemble “for the grinding of the wheat for the day,” since “all bread was made at home,” using a “rather big hand-mill” that was fixed in the storeroom of the house for this purpose (16). The chore was accompanied by “talk and laughter,” as the latter in those days “came quite easily to the household” (16). She describes Kasturba Gandhi as “proud of and ambitious for her children,” and a mother who “wanted them to be nicely clothed,” often urging Millie to plead with Gandhi on behalf of the boys when they needed “new shoes or a new suit,” even as Gandhi believed that his sons must not be “taught to think of things that might obscure the vision of the soul’s needs” (22). Rajmohan Gandhi points out, that “we can only imagine the feelings of [Kasturba] at having to share her home and husband, soon after rejoining him, with a white couple,” as also “her reaction to the hard routine that Gandhi had introduced into their home” (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 113). Gandhi himself, however, is quick to say that he does not remember his wife or him “ever having had a difference” with the newlywed
Polaks, and that even if Millie and Kasturba “had some unpleasant experiences,” they would qualify as “no more than what happens in the best-regulated homogeneous families” (M. K. Gandhi 258). Guha, too, indicates that Millie Polak and Kasturba Gandhi did indeed become friends, with “the newcomer’s buoyant nature overcoming the matriarch’s natural reserve and her lack of familiarity with the English language” (Guha 185). In her memoir on Gandhi, Millie Polak describes dinner hour in the busy household as “nearly always a very happy one,” regularly including guests, and feeding “ten to fourteen people” every evening (23). In keeping with Gandhi’s assorted experiments with vegetarianism, into which the Polaks had been inducted, dinner typically included “various kinds of vegetable dishes” as the first course, “accompanied by a kind of lentil dish, hard-baked wholemeal bread and nut butter, and various dishes of raw salad,” followed by a second course comprising “a milk dish and raw fruit” (23). The meal would end with the serving of “a kind of cereal coffee or lemonade, hot or cold according to the season” (23).

Within months of Millie Polak’s arrival, however, the Johannesburg household was dismantled, owing to Gandhi’s decision to form an ambulance corps to nurse the wounded native Africans in the Zulu or Bambatha Uprising of 1906. The Polaks accompanied Kasturba and Mohandas along with their children to the Phoenix settlement, which comprised “about a hundred acres of fertile land” located “about fourteen miles from Durban,” amidst “the sugar-cultivated lands of the north coast of Natal” (35). The settlement was a colony that was established along “Tolstoyan principles,” which also included, among other things, a “printing press where Indian Opinion was printed, published and dispatched to various parts of South Africa and overseas” (35). The philosophy underlying Phoenix was devised to be “self-supporting” to the greatest extent possible, where “life’s material requirements were to be reduced to a minimum” (35). The settlement, says Polak, had a school, where students of the community would be taught “elementary school subjects,” but where the educational focus would on “character-building,” and the attempt to “find God in natural beauty and in their own inner selves” (36). In keeping with Gandhi’s growing interest and belief in naturopathy, the settlement included a “house of healing,” where “[r]est, and pure air, fasting and a cleansing of the internal organism of the body by water, steam baths, sun treatment and mud packs,” among other practices were incorporated into the life style of the community members (36). Phoenix was located at some remove from Durban, which made access to the most basic provisions extremely inconvenient to all its inhabitants. Polak says that there were eight “bungalow type” dwellings on the settlement, all of which were constructed using “corrugated iron, with rough wooden supports and no inner lining” (37). The ‘bungalow’ that Kasturba and her family inhabited, unlike the well-appointed houses she had gotten used to occupying in Durban, Bombay and Johannesburg, consisted of “a large room, which was living-and-dining-room, two small bedrooms, another small room as
kitchen and a lean-to structure for bathroom” (37). The bathroom was “ingenious,” if wholly “primitive,” with a “good-sized hole” in the iron roof, into which a “watering can” attached to a “piece of chord” and balanced on a “piece of wood,” was filled with water to serve as a “good imitation shower-bath” for anyone who stood under it (37).

Sanitary conditions, too, says Polak, were “equally primitive,” with each bungalow having a “bucket system,” that involved every householder bearing the responsibility of “emptying the bucket at a recognised place set aside for that purpose” (37). Polak admits that she was “disappointed and depressed” by her first view of Phoenix, and that Kasturba too “did not feel happy” about having been “transplanted” from Durban “with its domestic and human amenities,” to the “more primitive conditions” that they were going to experience in the fledgling settlement (38). The two women, recalls Polak, “lay awake” in a shared room the first night, “talking and grumbling for hours” till Gandhi “walked up and down outside our room,” and asked the women of the household “what we really wanted” (38). Kasturba’s response to her husband in their native Gujarati was beyond Polak’s comprehension, but the patriarch urged them to be “patient,” promising to get “any other really necessary things” that they might require; only to ensure yet again, as per his diktat that “life was lived in Phoenix in a very simple way” (38). It is evident by this time that Gandhi’s spiritual politics had begun to inform, in vital ways, his notions of domesticity, and often impinged on the way in which Kasturba and her sons lived. Kasturba’s life in South Africa also clearly marked a transition in her identity from that of the wife of a successful and westernised lawyer to a woman whose worldview and lifestyle had witnessed numerous modifications along the lines of her husband’s evolving ideology. Judith Brown says that Gandhi believed “passionately” that Phoenix was a “‘nursery’ for producing a new kind of human and a new kind of Indian,” and the experiments there could be conducted “without any of the restraints inevitable in India” (Brown 43). It was also a place, where women at the settlement would experience the liberty to take on “new roles” in comparison to those they performed in their “home environments” (43). While Gandhi’s intentions were indeed noble, his reformist agenda with regard to women and children, as also his desire to embrace a simple, communal existence must have met with some consternation by those who had to cope with the harsh terrain as also the extremely unconventional material and cultural set-up of the community, including his wife.

It was also around this time, in 1906, that Gandhi took a formal vow of lifelong chastity and poverty. Deeply influenced by his spiritual mentor, Raychandbhai, Gandhi had grown to be plagued by numerous questions about the nature of marriage, and devotion between husband and wife. “Did my faithfulness consist in making my wife the instrument of my lust?” he asks in the first of two chapters in his autobiography dedicated to Brahmacharya,
or sexual continence (M. K. Gandhi 172). “So long as I was the slave of lust,” he continues, “my faithfulness was worth nothing” (172). And since his wife “was never the temptress,” the only obstacle that stood in the way of his taking a vow of celibacy, was his “weak will or lustful attachment” (172). Gandhi’s desire for chastity, says Rajmohan Gandhi, was also connected to his “unwillingness to be tied down by more children” (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 119). “The less he had,” the biographer continues, “the more he would become,” and the road ahead demanded that he be “lean and clean,” even as his “battles and weapons too had to be unsoiled” (119). Louis Fischer says that the motivation behind Gandhi’s sexual continence was spiritual. A life of chastity “reinforced his passion and determination to sacrifice for the common weal,” and while “storms continued to rage within,” he could “harness them for the generation of more power” (Fischer 97). The very first change he instituted in his domestic arrangement to that extent, was to “stop sharing the same bed” with Kasturba or “seeking privacy with her” (M. K. Gandhi 266). Gandhi eventually plunged down the path of Brahmacharya after “full discussion and mature deliberation,” with his colleagues and friends, but did not share his thoughts with Kasturba until he was ready to take the vow (M. K. Gandhi 174). When he did consult his wife, he says “she had no objection,” with a succinctness that affords us absolutely no insight into her perspective on what was a definitive decision concerning the very nature of their marriage (174). Ramachandra Guha says that the “sense of outrage at his not having consulted his wife” on the matter of his Brahmacharya, is both a “very modern” and “very Western” one (Guha 200). He believes that it is “unlikely” that Kasturba was “greatly disturbed” by Gandhi’s vow of chastity; instead, he says, she was more worried by extension, that her husband sought “not just to distance himself from her physically, but also from his children, emotionally” (201).

Arun Gandhi says, once again, that we can do no more than “speculate about what happened in private between my grandparents,” owing to the fact that “only one side of the story has been told,” in this regard as in numerous other aspects of their life together (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 93). He adds also, that while Gandhi’s candour with respect to his own “strong sexual passions and strivings for self-control” enabled him to express his deepest ideas and anxieties with ease, Kasturba’s “reticence” in these matters seems to have prevented her from confiding in others, contributing to the paucity of even second-hand information in this aspect of their life as a couple (93). While this lack of documentation cripples any attempt to assess Kasturba’s ideological and emotional position on Brahmacharya, it nevertheless compels us to reflect on the several ways in which Gandhi, often unilaterally, bridged the gap between the personal and public; as a result of which, Kasturba and their four children were left with no choice but to comply with the patriarch’s practices, turning the domestic realm into a microcosm for experiments, which could then
be applied to the transformation of the lives of India’s vast masses. In an equally one-sided decision, that seems to indicate no conversation or consultation with Kasturba, Gandhi had earlier allowed an insurance policy to lapse, convinced by the teachings of the Bhagvad Gita of “non-possession,” wherein a wealthy individual “should act like the trustee who, though having control over great possessions, regards not an iota of them as his own” (M. K. Gandhi 222). Having renounced any claims to wealth, he also applied himself to the idea that “God, who created my wife and children as well as myself, would take care of them” (222). He also wrote to his brother, Laxmidas, to whom he had been regularly sending money, saying the latter should not expect any more by way of “future savings,” as he was planning to consign all his wealth to the service of his brethren (222). Guha’s biography on Gandhi offers rather telling excerpts of the censorious letter, where Gandhi outlines what was rapidly sprouting into a concrete life philosophy for the once affluent lawyer. “[M]y family,” says the missive, “comprises all living beings;” with the only difference being that “those who are more dependent on me, because of blood relationship or other circumstances, get more help from me” (Guha 236).

Even as Gandhi was convinced that “without the service of Brahmacharya service of the family would be inconsistent with service of the community,” he also began to conduct various experiments in dietetics, tailored around the idea that “control of the palate” was essential to the proper observance of the vow of celibacy. His food as a brahmachari, consequently, was to be “limited, simple, spiceless, and, if possible, uncooked” (M. K. Gandhi 264, 165). He also began to “attach greater importance to fasting,” or “having one meal a day on holidays;” further, if there arose “some occasion for penance or the like,” he “gladly utilised it” for the purpose of fasting (268). Upon settling Kasturba and the children in Phoenix, Gandhi and the Polaks moved to a smaller house “in Bellevue East” in Johannesburg (Guha 199). Millie Polak describes the abode as “devoid of any pretence of beauty” or “of the things I had been accustomed to look upon as necessities,” with no carpets to cover the bare floors and no curtains to line the windows (Polak 54). When Polak asked for a painting to “hide the wall’s ugliness,” she was told by Gandhi to “look out the window and admire the sunset, more beautiful than anything conceived by the hand of man” (Guha 199). Unlike Kasturba, who gave into her husband’s ever-mutating demands, Millie Polak argued with Gandhi till he acceded to her request, however reluctantly, and under her supervision, the “little house became a home” (Polak 56). In a revealing description of their routines in the Bellevue house, Polak talks about the division of labour among the three residents, especially since, in accordance with Gandhi’s belief in social equality and economic thrift, they were not permitted to keep a servant (56). “The men left early in the morning,” she says, “and I was left with the day to put the house in order and cook the evening meal,” while the “washing up of the dinner things was to be shared by the
men of the household” (57). Soon enough, it was discovered that this was not a very “satisfactory arrangement” as neither Gandhi nor Henry Polak “had the time for such domestic duties as were supposed to fall upon them” (57). As a result, “a young Native boy was procured” to assist with household chores, despite Gandhi’s initial protestations to the contrary (57). The patriarch in this household clearly made and modified rules in keeping with the practicability of the ideal at hand.

Millie Polak also had to endure Gandhi’s experiments with dietetics towards the forwarding of his *Brahmacharya* goal. These included cooking food without “the addition of salt,” and “without any condiments,” for a few months; followed by an experiment marked by “the absence of sugar” to avoid using a product of “‘indentured’ labour” (Polak 63). Another experiment followed comprising only “‘unfired’ food served with olive oil,” and then others that involved the exclusion of milk and raw onions, despite Gandhi’s fondness for the latter, because he “came to the conclusion that [they] were bad for the passions” (63). The Phoenix settlement where Kasturba and her sons continued to live, meanwhile, remained a community that Gandhi had founded, “but could rarely be part of” (Guha 249). When Gandhi moved in with Hermann Kallenbach, the German architect he had befriended, in early months of 1908, he had the opportunity to “pursue his self-improvement more seriously,” a project in which he found Kallenbach to be a “far more congenial partner than the Polaks” (285). The two housemates would rise at five a.m., and do “all their own cooking and cleaning,” running what must have been “the only household in a white neighbourhood without a servant” (285). Under Gandhi’s influence, Kallenbach, who had hitherto lived luxuriously, “reduced his expenses by some 90 per cent” and even took a vow of celibacy, much to his friend and mentor’s satisfaction (285). During one of his several incarcerations in Volksrust Prison in 1908, Gandhi was informed that Kasturba was seriously ill, having suffered a haemorrhage and the attending doctor was “not sure she would survive” (307). The illness, says Guha, brought to the fore “the competing claims on Gandhi’s life” twenty-five years into his marriage to Kasturba, and even though the couple had “always been true to one another,” periods of “extended separation” enforced by his desire to serve a greater common good, often caused anxiety to a wife who “deeply cherished their time together” especially in a foreign land in which she had “lived with him and for him, but never really felt at home” (307). And while she her children were a comforting presence, even as Gandhi was, for the large part, an absentee husband, it was his “company and attention” that she “craved” the most (307).

When Gandhi received a missive from his colleague and friend Albert West from the Phoenix settlement asking him to pay a fine and return to the community to be with Kasturba in her illness, as in scores of other situations that were to emerge in the future,
Gandhi “[placed] the interests of the community above those of his own wife” (308). He wrote a letter to Kasturba saying that though he was anxious about her health, he “was not in a position” to come to the settlement to nurse her, because to abandon his prison sentence, would “reduce the struggle” of the Indian community in South Africa “to a farce” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 162). He added, crucially, that should Kasturba die before him, he would continue to love her just as much after she was gone, as her soul, to him, was “deathless” (162). He also assured her in the letter that he would not remarry in the event of her demise, and that her death would be “another great sacrifice for the cause of Satyagraha” (162). Guha describes the letter as possessed of “an unusual and perhaps unexpected tenderness,” with Gandhi attempting to comfort Kasturba, who was raised amidst the Hindu belief that a truly devout wife “did not predecease her husband,” even as she struggled with the possibility of succumbing to the illness without seeing her husband (Guha 308). The event also offers vital testimony to the many personal sacrifices that Kasturba was left with no choice but to make in the face of her husband’s unequivocal focus on, what he believed to be the path of truth and nonviolence. Gandhi was by Kasturba’s side in Durban when she underwent a successful albeit painful surgery without chloroform owing to her anaemic state in early 1909, commenting in his autobiography on her “wonderful bravery” (M. K. Gandhi 269). However, her condition worsened a few days later, following which, her physician, Dr. Nanji, telephoned Gandhi, who had returned to Johannesburg, seeking “permission to give her beef tea,” a request that the Vaishnava householder flatly denied (269). Upon arrival at Durban, Gandhi discovered, much to his shock, that Dr. Nanji had already given Kasturba beef tea without the patient’s knowledge before consulting her husband. When Gandhi sought a physically weak Kasturba’s opinion in the matter, she offered a “resolute reply” saying that she would “far rather die in [her husband’s] arms than pollute [her] body with such abominations” (270).

Gandhi claims he “pleaded with her,” saying she was under no obligation to follow his beliefs, and even cited instances of “Hindu friends and acquaintances who had no scruples about taking meat or wine as medicine,” but also admits to being “delighted” by her unwavering decision to conform to their dietary restrictions even under such extenuating circumstances (270). He decided to move her, against the doctor’s wishes, to Phoenix where he would treat her “by his own, naturopathic methods” (Guha 318). Elaborate preparations were made to take Kasturba back to the community with Albert West meeting Gandhi and Kasturba at the Phoenix station “with hot milk, umbrellas and six men to carry Kasturba home in a hammock” (318). Kasturba, reduced to “mere skin and bone” by her illness, bore the experience with cheery stoicism, comforting her husband saying, “Nothing will happen to me. Don’t worry” (M. K. Gandhi 271). In a letter to Kallenbach from Phoenix, Gandhi discusses Kasturba’s progress, but also reveals her mental and emotional vulnerability in the
situation saying, “[s]he cannot bear the idea of my leaving her bedside for a single minute,” and that “she clings to me and hugs me” like “a baby” for fear that he would leave the settlement and return to participate in more Satyagraha activities which would inevitably lead to more imprisonment; and yet, as Guha says, faced with “a serious conflict between family duties and societal obligations,” Gandhi would unequivocally “choose to go to prison rather than stay with his ailing wife” (Guha 318). During her illness, a “Swami” or “religious teacher” visited Phoenix “prompted by sympathy” for Kasturba and pleaded on her behalf to Mohandas in the presence of his sons, Manilal and Ramdas, saying “there were no real strictures against eating meat” in the Hindu canon, citing verses from the writings of Manu, “the ancient lawgiver,” to prove his point (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 166). He was countered by Gandhi, whose views on vegetarianism were “not based on scriptures or theology, but on ethical principles and medical knowledge” (166). It was Kasturba who put an end to the argument between the two men, resolutely refusing to take beef tea, saying her mind was made up (166). Whether her views were based on the same ethical principles as those of her husband, driven by ideas drawn from scripture, or motivated by unstinting and unquestioning wifely loyalty to Gandhi’s worldview, unfortunately, will never be clear.

The changes in Gandhi’s life style were also “reflected” in the life of the Phoenix community. Spicy and tasty snacks and meals had given way to “simpler non-spiced food” which was “increasingly eaten in Indian style by the Indian settlers” using their “fingers rather than the knife and fork” (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 143). Gandhi’s beliefs were slowly coming full circle, having moved away from Indian attire and lifestyle in an attempt to emulate the ‘civilised’ West in his more formative years as a young adult in London and South Africa, and returning, in protest against imperialist hegemony, to his emotional, religious and cultural roots by discarding aspects of the West; most importantly, carrying his wife and children with him through the many changes he instituted in his life regardless of whether they really embraced those changes with a cogent awareness of their ideological significance. As the patriarch of what now seemed like an ever growing family, he formulated and modified the philosophy that underpinned their domestic existence, and they seemed to follow the said philosophy but not without demur. Harilal’s fraught relationship with his father over his neglected education and stymied professional potential was the source of much worry and anxiety to Kasturba. Other members of the community also had to cope with radically reformist ideas concerning caste, religious community and gender that Gandhi foisted on his followers and disciples. When Indians started courting imprisonment, Phoenix came to be used to house the dependents of the arrested individuals, with “each Phoenix family taking in as many as they could” (143). Orthodox Hindu households balked at the idea of accommodating Muslims in their residence. In one instance cited by Rajmohan Gandhi, we see that while Chhaganlal Gandhi and his wife Kashiben took in a Muslim boy, Ibrahim,
during this time, they would “purify over a fire the utensils in which food for Muslims had been cooked” (143). With newcomers from various communities seeking asylum in the settlement, “multi-faith prayers and prayer songs” were introduced, which became “a permanent feature from 1908-09” to bolster the Phoenix ethos of inclusiveness and diversity (143). Arun Gandhi cites an incident concerning Kasturba’s health which finds mention in Gandhi’s autobiography in the chapter “Domestic Satyagraha,” where he calls it “one of the sweetest recollections of my life,” but not in any of the other biographies that are examined in this study (M. K. Gandhi 273).

Gandhi, says the biographer, who was visiting Phoenix in early 1910, upon his return from a visit to England, “became concerned” about Kasturba’s physical well being; in the year since her surgery and painful recovery, she had “slowly regained her strength,” and had also resumed her “usual household chores,” but “her weight had not increased,” and she had also suffered “a slight reoccurrence of haemorrhaging,” which worried her husband (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 173). Gandhi had read that in order “to regain their health, frail people should avoid eating all forms of beans, peas, lentils, or other legumes,” an idea that he believed in, but of which he needed to convince Kasturba, who saw “no connection between food and desires” and who believed that “tasty food helped build the body” (173). When Gandhi suggested the new diet to his wife, she was “sceptical” and “refused to take him seriously,” playfully suggesting that he give up lentils before advising others to do so (173-4). Mohandas contemplated her words and immediately offered to cease consuming lentils of any kind for a whole year, on the condition that she partake of this experiment with him. Kasturba, says Arun Gandhi, pleaded with her husband to take back his vow, but Mohandas was steadfast, saying, “what good are words if they are spoken without conviction” (174). Consequently, the couple “began their new diet the same day,” and Kasturba’s condition “soon improved” (174) When the haemorrhaging “stopped completely,” Gandhi assigned “full credit for her recovery” to the diet he prescribed (174). In the same year, out of political necessity, in order to lodge the Indian passive resisters and their families, Gandhi accepted land donated by Hermann Kallenbach, to create the Tolstoy Farm near Johannesburg in the Transvaal. Spreading out over 1,000 acres, and containing “many fruit trees, two wells and a spring,” the property was twenty-two miles from the city, and located “close to a railway station named Lawley” (Guha 394). The trees on the farm provided “an abundance of oranges, apricots and plums,” while Kallenbach himself oversaw “the construction of a residence for men, another for women, a house for himself, a schoolhouse, and a workshop for carpentry and shoemaking” (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas 159). The men on Tolstoy farm wore “labourers dress but in the European style,” namely “workingmen’s trousers and shirts imitated from prisoners’ uniforms” which were tailored by the women on the farm (160).
Members of the community soon fell into a routine where they would consume “farm-baked bread and ‘coffee’ made from wheat” for breakfast at six in the morning,” followed by “rice, dal and vegetables” for lunch at eleven; and “wheat-pap and milk or bread and ‘coffee’” for their evening meal at 5.30 p.m.; with meals taken in “prison-style bowls” along with “farm-made wooden spoons” (160). The Tolstoy Farm also had multi-faith prayers including “prayer songs in Tamil, Telugu, Gujarati and Hindi” which were conducted after the evening meal (160). Gandhi also had “unconventional ideas” on co-education; and “encouraged boys and girls, some of them adolescents, to bathe at the spring at the same time” ensuring that he was around for the protection of the girls from any untoward activities, his eyes following them “as a mother’s eye follows a daughter” (Fischer 137). At night, says Louis Fischer, “everybody slept in an open veranda and the young folks grouped their sleeping places around Gandhi” with beds only three feet apart (137). Gandhi, he says, believed that the youngsters in the community knew he cared for them “with a mother’s love,” embodying and projecting the persona of maternal nurturance, traditionally ascribed to women, that Gandhi would develop and practice in greater measure with the young female disciples who lived with him in his ashrams in India (137). Kasturba, too, had joined the farm, which, by the end of June, also had a “functioning school,” with five pupils including Manilal and Ramdas Gandhi, with their father as “the main teacher” (Guha 395). With the family unit “restored” after many years of separation among its various members, Kasturba settled into a new life on Tolstoy Farm. Since she “had the company of other women,” says Guha, “she was not lonely,” and the experience was “transformative” for her sons, who were put to manual labour under their father’s guidance, performing the tasks of “cooking, cleaning,” and “digging the land” (395). Through many months of 1911, when Gandhi was based on the Farm, he ensured that the day began for all its inhabitants with “several hours of physical labour,” following which he “taught at the school from ten-thirty to four” (419). Under the influence of their school master, the students “did not eat salt, vegetables and pulses between Monday and Saturday,” and “lived on fruits (especially apples and bananas), bread with olive oil, and rice and sago porridge” (419).

Speaking of Gandhi’s complicated relationships with his family, especially his sons, Rajmohan Gandhi says that the patriarch’s children “had to be a good deal abler than others” to qualify for “praise or a place,” and if there were ever a situation where Gandhi was called upon to choose “between one of his sons and someone else equally qualified,” it was the latter who was invariably given preference (Rajmohan Gandhi, The Good Boatman, 362). Harilal, Gandhi’s oldest son, often accused his father “of sacrificing his sons at the altar of ambition,” even though Gandhi’s biographer grandson reasons that his harshness towards his own flesh and blood could be viewed as “the price a commander in action, and
his nearest have to pay” (363). “When all in the boat have to be saved,” he says, “the helmsman’s children cannot be the first to receive lifejackets” (363). In a bid to save their minds from being colonised by a Western education, Gandhi had insisted on teaching his sons at home, a task to which he was unable to apply himself adequately, as a result of which, none of the four boys received “a literary education either to their or to my satisfaction,” he admits in his autobiography (M. K. Gandhi 167). Gandhi also says that “the undesirable traits” that he saw in Harilal were an “echo of my own undisciplined and unformulated early life” which “coincided with the most impressionable years of my eldest son” (167). In the same vein, he also adds that Harilal believed that the period in his life that Gandhi dismisses as that of “half-baked knowledge and indulgence” was in fact the “brightest period of [his] life” and the changes that he effected later were “miscalled enlightenment” owing to “delusion” (167-8). Guha says that Gandhi “bore down heavily” on Harilal, not recognising “his good fortune in being allowed to follow his own path independent of his parents’ wishes” (Guha 417). When his friend and supporter, Pranjivan Mehta, “endowed two scholarships for Phoenix boys to study in London,” Gandhi overlooked Harilal in favour of first, Chhaganlal, and later a Parsi student named Sorabji Adajania (415). The youngster’s desire to study and earn a livelihood, was consistently thwarted by a father who wished to dedicate his own life, and, by extension, those of his sons to the cause of the larger community.

Harilal’s marriage to Chanchal Gulab Vora at an early age also did not meet the approval of his father, who threatened to cease acknowledging him as a son. When Harilal came to live in the Phoenix Settlement, soon followed by his wife, the patriarch attempted to make amends with his first-born, who also became a key player in Gandhi’s Satyagraha activities in South Africa, often courting arrest and imprisonment. In January of 1909, Gandhi wrote to his daughter-in-law, Chanchal from the Transvaal asking her to “give up the idea of staying with Harilal for the present,” as her husband would “grow by staying apart and perform his other duties” including serve several prison terms over the next year in service of fellow Indians in South Africa (315). When Harilal tried to run away from Phoenix and return to India to complete his matriculation examination in 1910, he was intercepted at Delgoa Bay by Gandhi’s associates, who brought him back to Johannesburg to meet his father (415). In a letter cited in Guha’s Gandhi before India, the troubled son recalls to his father the conversation they had before he left for India, where he sums up Gandhi’s shortcomings in a trenchant accusation that reads “You did not allow me to measure my capabilities; you measured them for me” (416). In the chapter “Letter to a Son” in The Life of Mahatma Gandhi, Louis Fischer describes a letter written by Gandhi to a fifteen-year-old Manilal, during one of the former’s prison terms in 1909, where he lauds his second son for having the opportunity “of nursing mother and cheerfully bearing her ill temper,” and
“looking after [Chanchal] and anticipating her wants and behaving to her so as to not make her feel the absence of Harilal,” and “being a guardian to Ramdas and Devadas” (Fischer 120). Gandhi adds that if Manilal succeeds in “doing this well,” he should consider himself as having received “more than half your education” (120). Fischer believes that having been married at thirteen, Gandhi “never had a boyhood,” and therefore “never understood his own boys” (122). While Gandhi wanted “a helper,” his son wanted the “freedom” to become a lawyer or a doctor; but this was not to be, for his father was “training him to be a minor saint” (122).

In 1913, When Gandhi was constantly on the move between Johannesburg and the Phoenix Settlement, to which his family had returned after a long spell on the Tolstoy Farm, he “received tidings about the moral fall of two inmates” of the ashram, the news of which came upon him “like a thunderbolt” (M. K. Gandhi 286). The lapse to which he refers involved an affair between Manilal and Jayakunwar, the older, married daughter of Pranjivan Mehta, who had been living, away from her husband who was in Mauritius, at Phoenix in order to experience ashram life, and to be mentored by Gandhi. Guha says that Gandhi’s son’s “violation of brahmacharya before marriage” would have angered the patriarch at any rate, but that he had committed the crime “with the married daughter of his closest friend and oldest patron” made the transgression “even harder to forgive” (Guha 459). Gandhi admits that he had been warned of the potential of such a lapse by Kasturba, but “being of a trusting nature,” he “ignored her caution” (M. K. Gandhi 286). Guha says that the unusual arrangement at Phoenix, which “brought under one roof boys and girls who were not related together,” was a key reason for the affair; without Gandhi’s realisation, he adds, “the risk of sexual attraction was inherent in this experiment of communal living” (Guha 459). Millie Polak, who was at Phoenix at the time, recalls in her memoirs that Gandhi exacted a “solemn vow” from Manilal that “he should not marry for some years and that he would live a strictly celibate life” until such time as Gandhi “should release him from his vow” (Polak 115). Of Jayakunwar, he said to Polak, she had “acknowledged her sin” and “fasted” with Gandhi, in addition to which she had “taken off all her jewellery, put on the garb of mourning, and had her hair cropped short as a sign of guilt and remorse” (Polak 113). Gandhi himself fasted for seven days as penance for the youngsters’ indiscretion (M. K. Gandhi 286). In 1914, when fresh rumours arose in Phoenix concerning Manilal and Jayakunwar, Kasturba, who believed that Gandhi was “shielding” Pranjivan Mehta’s daughter from confronting her wrongdoing, had a “fearful row” with her husband, the details of which have been cited from a letter written by Gandhi to Hermann Kallenbach in Guha’s biography (Guha 515).
In the letter, we witness the complexity of Gandhi and Kasturba’s relationship unfurl through the former’s perspective. A weeping Kasturba, it says, accused him of making her “leave all the good food in order to kill her,” and that Gandhi was “tired of her” and “wished her to die” (515). He goes on to say that he has “nursed her as a son would nurse his mother,” but that his love “has not been sufficiently intense and selfless to make her change her nature” (515). He also adds, somewhat uncharitably, that he “cannot complain of her being a particularly bad wife” even as he acknowledges that “no other woman would have probably stood the changes in her husband’s life” as Kasturba had, and as someone who had not “thwarted” him, she had been “most exemplary” (515). He does conclude, however, by saying “you cannot attach yourself to a particular woman and yet live for humanity” (515). Guha says that the letter, “while unable to conceal a sense of impatience with Kasturba,” views her discontent as “having its origins in choices made by [Gandhi] that she (and he) were unaware of when they got married in their teens in Porbandar” (515-6). The letter reveals the more human side of Kasturba, as a woman struggling to keep pace with her husband who was most definitely not of his time in most regards, even as she, as a conventional Hindu upper caste woman most certainly was. Equally importantly, it expresses her desires for a fuller life, less marred and oppressed by Gandhi’s lofty diktats, and his desire to control every aspect of their existence. It offers insights into the differences in their education and worldview, even as it highlights Kasturba’s ability to wrestle with her husband, however unsuccessfully, in matters on which she felt passionately. Arun Gandhi’s biography of Kasturba, interestingly, makes a fleeting reference to his father’s attraction to Jayakunwar, but does not explore the incident and its aftermath in any detail. When Jayakunwar was found to be making “sexual overtures” towards another man in the ashram, a few weeks later, she was sent back to her husband (516). The Gandhi family returned to India in January 1915, where it lived and worked in different parts of the country over the next three decades. The following section traces aspects of their domesticity in India from 1915 to 1942 amidst the larger backdrop of Gandhi’s steering of and participation in India’s struggle for freedom.

3.4 REPRESENTATIONS OF THE GANDHIS IN INDIAN ASHRAMS (1916-1942)

On the return to India from England after two decades in South Africa, Kasturba Gandhi and her husband “were enjoying the voyage” even though neither was in the best of health, and the weather was cold and stormy, because, “for almost the first time since their marriage,” according to Rajmohan Gandhi, “Kasturba had her husband wholly to herself;” even their children had left earlier with other members of the Phoenix settlement and were awaiting their parents in Shantiniketan on the outskirts of Calcutta (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 190). The statement brings to the fore the nature of their marriage which had witnessed
various emotional, physical and material upheavals and changes during their South Africa years, all of them steered and driven entirely by Gandhi’s political and spiritual aspirations. When Gandhi founded the Satyagraha Ashram on the bungalow and property donated to him by the Ahmedabad barrister, Jivanji Desai, in Kochrab, its inhabitants were made to “pledge themselves” to eleven vows, including “non-violence, truth, non-stealing, chastity, non-possession, bread labour, control of the palate, fearlessness, respect for all religions, swadeshi (India-made things), and the abolition of untouchability” (193). Brown says that Gandhi wanted the ashram to be “a sermon in action, to teach India about the ends and means he had come to value supremely in South Africa” (Brown 100). She adds that while the heart of Kochrab ashram lay in a “religious vision” and it stood in the “Hindu tradition of a community of permanent members than on the authority of one guru,” its scope was “far more broadly social than that of a traditional ashram” (100). The emphasis was on a “spartan lifestyle” with a daily time-table from 4.00 am to 10.00 pm which “presupposed morning and evening prayers and considerable manual labour,” including “work on the land and hand-weaving,” as well as the “routine domestic work of cooking, cleaning and drawing water” (100). Communication in the ashram would be in the mother tongue, even as Gandhi devised an education programme for those who wished to enrol as students, regardless of whether they were “adolescents, adults, or children with their parents” (100). The settlement, once again, was developed along the lines of “truth, non-violence, moral economics, true education and an equitable social order” by Gandhi, under which the rest of the members, including his wife and children, had to subsume their own individual interests and ambitions (100).

Having returned to India, Kasturba, says Arun Gandhi, who was “full hope,” felt that “it was a time of renewal,” because they were “in their own home” once again, and could live a “quiet, harmonious life together as one family” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 200). This sense of peace and well-being was soon shattered by the arrival of a letter from a businessman and acquaintance called Amritlal Thakkar, asking Gandhi to accommodate a “humble and honest untouchable family,” in Kochrab (M. K. Gandhi 331). This family, consisting of Dudabhai, Danibehn, who had been “a teacher in Bombay,” and their daughter Lakshmi, who was then “a mere toddling babe,” agreed to “abide by the rules” of the community, and were accepted by Gandhi, but their admission “created a flutter amongst the friends who had been helping the Ashram” (331). The family belonged to the “Gujarati-speaking community of Dheds or Dhedhs that worked with hides” traditionally considered the work of outcastes (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 195). Arun Gandhi says that reactions to his grandfather’s decision to include Dudabhai’s family from the “orthodox community” in the neighbourhood were “not so benign,” including a threat to the community’s water supply (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 202). This was not so surprising, he adds, “in a country where
every community had to have separate wells for Muslims and Hindus,” and where Hindus “of every caste” believed that they would be “contaminated if so much as one drop of water from an Untouchable’s bucket spilled on them” (202). The well keeper on the ashram property “cursed and abused” its residents who “neither retreated nor retaliated,” and over time, the harassment stopped (202). However, the ashram ceased to receive monetary help from its well wishers, which was followed by “rumours of a proposed social boycott” (M. K. Gandhi 331). Even as the community rapidly ran out of funds, its patriarch was clear that despite the boycott and the lack of access to the “usual facilities,” the ashram would not move out of Ahmedabad; instead, in an even more radical, yet peaceful, response to the marginalisation by caste Hindus in the area, Gandhi planned to shift the premises to the “untouchables’ quarter” in the city (332). However, he was paid a visit by Ambalal Sarabhai, “a young industrialist in his twenties,” who had been “impressed by Gandhi’s readiness to address caste inequalities,” which he himself “had always found offensive” (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 195). Sarabhai offered Gandhi “a wad of currency” amounting to Rs. 13,000/- to continue running the ashram, giving it a new lease of life (195).

Even as the Satyagraha Ashram found its feet thanks to Sarabhai’s generous donation, the ashramites, including Kasturba, were “restive” owing to the presence of the Dhed family in their midst (195). Gandhi says that his “eyes and ears easily detected their indifference, if not their dislike towards Danibehn” (M. K. Gandhi 332). He says in his autobiography that he chooses to “skip over quite a number of things pertaining to this subject,” specifically how the ashramites “tackled delicate questions” arising out of the principal one, namely, how they had to “overcome some unexpected difficulties;” but some of these details can be cobbled together through a reading of the other biographies examined in this study (333). Arun Gandhi says that his grandfather noticed how Danibehn “was never permitted to help with the cooking,” and how her husband, Dudhabhai, “was always stopped outside the kitchen door when he asked for a drink of water;” worse still, when little Lakshmi strayed into the kitchen, “any utensils the child touched were immediately washed,” and the “entire kitchen scrubbed” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 203). Members of the ashram, including Kasturba, Maganlal and his wife Santokben “threatened to leave” the community altogether in protest against Gandhi’s caste reform (Brown 101). In a letter to V. S. Srinivasa Sastri, cited in The Good Boatman, Gandhi discusses Kasturba’s rebellion against his introducing the untouchable family to the ways of the ashram. “I have told Mrs. Gandhi she could leave me and we should part good friends,” he says calmly, describing his trenchant belief in matters of social equality, one that could even risk the sundering of his marriage of forty-six years (Rajmohan Gandhi, The Good Boatman, 234). It was important to him because it “enables me to demonstrate the efficiency of passive resistance in social questions” (234). Maganlal and Santokben left Kochrab “temporarily,” but Kasturba “endured alongside her
husband,” even as Gandhi remarked later that year, that “she was still smouldering inside, though she was outwardly calmer” (Brown 101). Arun Gandhi reasons that Kasturba had grown up having been taught to believe that “Untouchables lived their present lives in the most loathsome circumstances as a just punishment for unpardonable sins committed in some previous existence” for which they “deserved” to be treated as outcasts, given the “foulest jobs” and “shunned as unclean” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 204). Gandhi, she realised, “had taken it for granted” that her years of living with a reformist husband in South Africa, and having been introduced to a more heterogeneous ethos, had “broadened her vision” (204).

Arun Gandhi says that in a foreign milieu where the Indian community, despite its social and economic diversity, “had been united in a single purpose” thanks to Gandhi’s efforts, it had been easy for Kasturba, “as a good wife supporting her husband” to set aside differences of “religion, region, and caste” (204). However, back home among her own people, she found it “impossible not to slip into the old ways of living” and “knowing,” and worse, she worried that Gandhi’s future would be “jeopardised” by such a revolutionary step against an orthodox mindset, which might altogether reject his reformist sensibilities (204). While Kasturba “went about her work silently” over the next few days contemplating Mohandas’s stand against untouchability, she found, according to her biographer, the word “Harijan,” a name given by her husband to members of the depressed classes, “echoing in some inner recess of her soul,” but she was unwilling to “let him decide the outcome for her,” choosing to look, instead, to God for her answers in this matter (204-5). One morning, watching Lakshmi at play, Kasturba ostensibly realised what an “exceptionally appealing child she was,” and what a “sunny disposition she had,” and following a rush of maternal love that surged forth, she came to recognise that if all the children she had played with and cared for on the Tolstoy Farm were “Children of God,” then Dudhabhai and Danibehn, too, were children of God, and their daughter, “a messenger of divine truth” (205). Thus, according to Arun Gandhi, Kasturba arrived at her own understanding of the exactness of her husband’s philosophy, without any external pressure, as she “gathered little [Lakshmi] into her arms and hugged her more tightly than she had ever hugged her own little granddaughter Rami” (205). Kasturba’s perspective and a detailed description of her response to the entire situation find little mention in any of the other biographies in this study, and are all but omitted in Gandhi’s autobiography. However, while her biographer attempts to establish her identity as independent of that of her overbearingly reformist husband and community patriarch, there is, unfortunately, no concrete evidence to support his theory once again, leaving us with more questions concerning Kasturba’s ability to negotiate with any clarity or autonomy her space within the growing ambit of the domestic universe that was controlled in no small measure by Gandhi and his philosophy.
Louis Fischer offers another point of view on the incident. When Kasturba “revolted at the idea” of having Danibehn in the kitchen “cooking food and washing dishes,” he says that Gandhi “heard her patiently,” and “appealed to her reason” (Fischer 182). When he found that her prejudices stemmed from “some remote inner recess” which “eludes common sense and humaneness,” he decided to “meet [Kasturba] on her own terms,” asking her if she would, as “a loyal Hindu wife” wish to “leave him and go to live in Porbandar” (183). Gandhi further convinced his wife that “he was responsible for her acts” and that if he “forced her to commit a sin” it was “his sin” to bear and not hers, as a result of which “she would not be punished” (183). A little further into his description of the incident, Fischer makes an unfair and culturally flawed comparison between the arrival of Lakshmi into Kasturba’s upper caste ethos with that of a “Negro daughter-in-law into the pre-Civil War mansion of a Southern lady” (183). The biographer does say, however, that having grown accustomed to “her husband’s strange ways,” Kasturba could “never refute his arguments,” and while he was becoming the “Mahatma,” who was she, “the almost illiterate Gujarati woman” to “question the man of God?” (183). She viewed him now as a “loving teacher” and no longer as a “lustful spouse,” owing to which she “resented him less and listened to him more;” and even as the “hostility to the untouchables continued to twitch” within her “nerve tissue,” her mind was learning “hospitality to his ideas” (183). In the “worshipful air of India,” concludes Fischer, “husband became hero” (183). This too, however, is a somewhat historically problematic idea, because in 1915, when Gandhi had first established Kochrab, he was relatively unknown across the country, and the moniker of “Mahatma” came to be appended to his persona on a more regular basis a few years later. However, Fischer’s analysis of Kasturba’s dependence on her husband for any social and economic sustenance, and her debilitating lack of literacy, and therefore, an educated point of view on the matter of caste reform, though unflattering, does merit some consideration and investigation. Gandhi’s letter to Srinivasa Sastri also points clearly in the direction of Fischer’s analysis. His position on the matter of the abolition of untouchability clearly brooked no argument, and Kasturba’s decision to accept the Dhed family despite deep initial resentment would certainly have hinged upon her husband’s unyielding temperament and his propensity to sacrifice the personal for the political. Despite the reformist air of the time, a decision on her part to break away from Gandhi after four decades of marriage, a sacred institution, would not have been met with applause from the community to which she belonged.

In 1917, when plague broke out in the village of Kochrab, Gandhi moved the entire community to a site which was purchased for an ashram to be set up on the banks of the Sabarmati River in Ahmedabad. There was “no building on the land,” he says in his
autobiography, and “no tree,” but its location near the river and its “solitude” were advantageous to the community (M. K. Gandhi 357). At first, members of the settlement started by “living under canvas,” with a “tin shed for a kitchen,” until the “permanent houses were built” (358). The ashram had grown since its Kochrab days, with “over forty souls, men, women and children,” eating in a “common kitchen” (358). While the whole “conception about the removal” to the Sabarmati Ashram was Gandhi’s, he left the execution of the move to his trusted lieutenant, Maganlal (358). Kasturba, once again, finds no mention in this affair, even though the sphere of domesticity should ideally have been her domain at the time as the matriarch of the community. The building of the ashram was painstaking and difficult, because material and provisions were available only in the city which was four miles away, and the ground on which they were hoping to construct the settlement had hitherto been a wasteland. Like Phoenix and the Tolstoy Farm, Sabarmati too was “infested with snakes” which posed a grave threat especially to the “little children” of the community (358). As per the rules etched out by the patriarch, these snakes could not be killed, even though members of the various ashrams that Gandhi had set up, had not “shed the fear of these reptiles;” however, as Gandhi recollects of the time, there had been “no loss of life occasioned by snakebite” owing to what he sees as “the hand of the God of Mercy” (358). Over the next two years, the Gandhi family rarely spent time together, various community-driven missions taking them to different parts of the country and world.

In a letter written to Ramdas Gandhi who was in Johannesburg in 1918, the Mahatma draws attention to how the family was “scattered wide apart,” with “Manilal in Phoenix, [Devadas] in Badharwa (Champaran), [Kasturba] in Bhitiharwa (Champaran), Harilal in Calcutta and [Gandhi himself] ever on the move from place to place” (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 217). The ashram rarely, if ever, saw them cohabit for long stretches of time.

Rajmohan Gandhi says that “[t]ruth, India and his family exerted different and at times conflicting pulls on Gandhi,” and while the latter’s responses to those pulls were “not always predictable, Kasturba and their sons felt that “the family always came last” in Gandhi’s list of priorities (217). Kasturba had spent long months of 1917 in the villages of Champaran district in Bihar, working with the wives of indigo farmers on aspects of domestic and community sanitation and hygiene. Upon her return to the Sabarmati Ashram in the spring of 1918, Arun Gandhi’s biography says she felt like “an aimless visitor in a strange city,” as she saw the progress in the construction of the ashram, where “[e]verything was happening at once” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 220). “Fruit trees and gardens had been planted,” and “brick walks laid out,” even as a “cluster of plain whitewashed buildings” were being readied to house “a school, a library, a weaving shed,” and cottages for residents” (220). “A flight of stone steps,” he adds, “led down to the river,” next to which was “a grassy field,” where “sunrise and sunset prayer services” were held.
It was also a time when Gandhi’s call for the production and use of Khadi or homespun and woven cloth found great resonance among his followers. Kasturba, says Arun Gandhi, found that the women of Sabarmati were “wholly absorbed in spinning,” in an attempt to bring to fruition her husband’s dream of the “renewal of India’s self-sufficient village economy byreviving an age-old cottage industry” (220). More importantly, she was “least prepared” for the presence of so many “new faces,” all new people “drawn by her husband’s mounting fame” (221). Visitors “constantly came and went” at the ashram, while “many stayed on as residents,” and “the place seemed always filled with strangers” (221). The biographer captures both Kasturba’s disorientation upon her return to domesticity after a long spell of public work, which he says, had infused her with a newer and deeper purpose, and just as vitally, discusses her anxiety and apprehension at trying to find her place in an establishment in which she had no founding role. Around this time, she was visited by her son Harilal’s wife, Gulab, and their five children, whose presence alleviated her unease, even though her daughter-in-law brought with her worrying stories about Harilal’s “bad habits” (221).

Over the “few weeks” that they stayed with her, Kasturba spent “endless hours” with her grandchildren; she “bathed them, told them stories, taught them songs;” she “washed and combed her granddaughters’ hair,” and “made sweets for her grandsons” (222). When she saw them off at the railway station, says Arun Gandhi, she was “restless and lonely” in her attempts to try and “settle back in the ashram routine” (222). She tried establishing contact with Gandhi, expressing interest in joining him in Nadiad, where he was on a mission recruiting soldiers for the Great War, to which he responded in an affectionate but firm letter saying that while he knew she was “longing” to be with him, it was best she remained where she was (222). “If you consider all children in the ashram as your own,” he added, “you will not miss yours” (222). Gandhi’s exacting standards towards his family are evident in another anecdote by Krishnadas of Orissa, which finds place in Rajmohan Gandhi’s Mohandas. When he discovered, in a “post-prayer conversation one day” that Kasturba was “unaware of the illness of an ashramite,” Gandhi asked his wife, “in front of the gathering” about the lapse on her part, saying “[i]f Devadas had fallen ill, you would have known of it long ago” (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 262). Gandhi’s accusation might have “upheld” the notions of equality that he valued, but Kasturba was most likely “humbled,” and “wept later in private” (262). Another description, cited in the same book, this time by Prabhavati Narayan, provides a picture of “Ba and Bapu’s lodgings” at Sabarmati, which comprised, among other arrangements, “a kitchen which served the guests of the Ashram as well” (304). This kitchen, says Narayan, “had gradually become a common mess” serving “fifteen to twenty persons,” and while “[a] few Ashramites helped [Kasturba] in her culinary chores,” most of the work was done by the matriarch herself, who took “great delight” in serving her
guests” (304). This account indicates that Kasturba did in fact have a firm hand in managing certain aspects of Gandhi’s ashram life. Yet another anecdote by G. Ramachandran, a Gandhian who spent a year at Sabarmati Ashram, which was vouched for by C. Rajagopalachari, is found in Louis Fischer’s biography of Gandhi, and throws light on the shifting power dynamic between the couple.

One day, says Ramachandran, when Kasturba had “cleaned up the kitchen after lunch and gone to the adjoining room for a nap,” her husband came into the kitchen, and “beckoning to a male assistant of Ba,” told him “in a whisper” that there would be guests arriving shortly, who “would have to be fed” (Fischer 204). “Putting a finger to his lips as he glanced towards Ba’s room,” Gandhi gave the assistant the requisite instructions for the meal to be prepared, and told him to “send for Ba only when she is needed,” and more importantly, not to “irritate” her, for fear that she would “wake up and burst upon” her husband (204). Gandhi left the kitchen “as quickly as he could,” but a “brass platter fell to the floor,” crushing his hopes of “escaping from his kitchen crime without detection” (204). The Mahatma was “confronted” after prayers that evening by Kasturba who stood, “arms akimbo,” asking him why he had not awakened her for the task (204). Known for her “fierce temper,” she “laughed incredulously” when Gandhi admitted that he was “afraid of [her] on such occasions” (204). Despite his growing and looming public stature, says Ramachandran, there was truth in the Mahatma’s confession of trepidation around his wife. The incident is reproduced in the chapter, “Ba: You Afraid of Me!” in Mukul Kalarthi’s Ba and Bapu; and the guests whom Gandhi tried to feed surreptitiously included Motilal Nehru (Kalarthi 48).

Sushila Nayyar’s memoir, Kasturba: Wife of Gandhi, offers insights into the details of Kasturba’s life in Sabarmati and later Sevagram Ashram. When the young Nayyar visited Sabarmati for the first time in 1929, she was taken to Kasturba’s room, which, she recalls, had “few articles” that were “neatly arranged,” with “not a speck of dust anywhere” (Nayyar 13). She describes Kasturba as an “extraordinarily active” person, who undertook all her tasks with “amazing agility and neatness” right to the very end of her life (14). Three years later, when Nayyar visited the Gandhis at their Sevagram Ashram in Wardha, she was promptly taken by Kasturba into her care, with the former’s luggage moved into her quarters comprising “a small room, a bathroom and a verandah” (18). In the early days, when the young Nayyar “got up in the morning and went away” leaving her “bedding as it was on the verandah,” it was Kasturba who “collected it and put it aside without saying a word” to her ward, who, upon discovering her lapse, felt “terribly ashamed” (18).

Speaking of Kasturba’s fiercely independent nature, Nayyar describes how she would never allow the younger woman to fold her bedding because she “hated taking service from others if she could at all help it” (18). When Nayyar’s older brother Pyarelal first joined the
Ashram and encountered his turn to help Kasturba in the community kitchen, he found her “a hard task-master,” one who did not “spare herself or others,” with little patience for “dirt or untidiness” or “irregularity and forgetfulness” (18). Nayyar points to her disciplined streak saying she was “very particular to get up” for the morning prayers that were conducted at 4 a.m.; and even as her husband caught a nap after prayers, Kasturba would be busy “getting his breakfast ready” (18). There was a “rivalry” among the younger women in the ashram to “render personal services” to Gandhi, and while Kasturba “loved to do everything for him on her own,” she was “too kind to disappoint the girls”, and yet, even as she “entrusted different duties to different persons, if they were good and obedient,” her “watchful eye” followed them around to ensure that “things were done properly,” and the “rules of cleanliness” observed (18). As a soldier in Gandhi’s satyagraha and swadeshi campaigns, she would spend most afternoons at the ashram “at her spinning wheel,” producing “400 to 500 rounds every day,” and when Nayyar would chastise her for taking on undue strain in her sixties despite ill health, she would “wave aside my objection with a smile” in the belief that though she could not “help her husband in reading or writing, work, or in high politics,” she could further his cause by “plying the wheel” (19). Kasturba, says Nayyar, also took part in the “whole of the prayer” every evening, including “the singing of the Ramayana,” for which she would diligently study every morning the passages to be recited in the evening prayer (19). When Gandhi set out on his evening walk, Kasturba would visit “the sick and others in the Ashram” and would even go out for a short walk with “other elderly ladies” only to meet her husband on his return (19). After the evening prayers, she would hold, what Nayyar calls, her “Durbar” where “the ladies of the Ashram would sit with her” and some even “pressed her feet,” as they discussed the “news of the day,” following which she would return to get Gandhi’s, her grandson Kanu’s, and her own bed ready for the night (19-20).

Judith Brown says that Gandhi’s “unique circumstances” in South Africa gave him “the opportunity to work with Indian women” in a way that would have been “socially unacceptable as well as politically unnecessary” back home in India (Brown 59). In Phoenix and the Tolstoy Farm, he had “encouraged women settlers to participate in new life-styles” where they were “not only treated as equals with the male members of the communities,” but also “educated in far more open social relations between people of different communities and castes” than would have been possible in India (59). His relationships with female ashramites in South Africa found greater fruition in the settlements he founded in India, with Gandhi espousing independence and open-mindedness among the women who came to live in his care. Rajmohan Gandhi cites an instance when a man, whose son and daughter-in-law stayed at the Sabarmati Ashram for a while, were so influenced by the Mahatma’s views, that the daughter-in-law gave up the veil; leading the father-in-law to complain that Gandhi’s advice to the youth to differ from seniors “if their conscience so
demanded,” was “damaging relations within the family” (Rajmohan Gandhi, *Mohandas*, 312). The man also had objections against “the women in the ashram sometimes touching Gandhi,” and “his touching girls in the ashram” (312). Replying to the man’s comments through an article in his journal, *Navajivan*, Gandhi said that the women in his ashrams enjoyed relationships with him of “mothers, sisters or daughters,” and that if they touched him, it was done in a “motherly spirit;” likewise, his touching the women was akin to “a father innocently touching his daughter in public” (312). “Physically touching those he felt close to” was one of Gandhi’s traits, says Rajmohan Gandhi (313). “Putting his hands on the shoulders of the ashram’s boys as he walked,” or “resting his arms on the shoulders of the ashram’s girls and women while walking,” or “thumping young and old on their backs,” or “stroking a blessing on their heads,” or “embracing the grieving” was his way of giving and receiving “affection through contact” (313). In Sevagram in the 1930s, Gandhi had begun to partake of an unconventional and controversial form of treatment for shivers, described by Pyarelal in *Harijan* as “an old symptom that seizes him whenever he receives an acute mental shock” that was typically propelled by “a sudden attack of sharp pain near the waist” (430).

This symptom was relieved by “a woman aide lying down beside him” with “Kasturba’s full knowledge” (430). This practice, says his biographer grandson, continued for “several weeks” in the winter of 1937-8, and Gandhi even began defending it as “an experiment in chastity,” and as a means for “enhancing it,” both “in himself and his companion” (430). While there has been no “suggestion or allegation” from anyone involved in the practice that there was “open or concealed lust at work,” there is no record of Kasturba’s views on the matter available in Gandhi’s autobiography or in the other biographies under scrutiny in this study, although Gandhi reiterates to his grandson, Kanti, in a letter saying that he never did conduct any experiment behind his wife’s back (430). None of Gandhi’s other biographers under scrutiny in this study make any mention of this aspect of the Mahatma’s life. His autobiography ends in 1920, almost eighteen years before this practice was adopted in his Indian ashrams, and neither Arun Gandhi nor Sushila Nayar discusses Kasturba’s perspective in this regard. Rajmohan Gandhi does discuss how Gandhi suffered a rude shock when he experienced “an involuntary emission” in the April of 1938, surrounded by his female aides including Sushila Nayyar and Prabhavati Narayan in Sevagram (430). The experience shamed him and called him to question the purity of his thoughts, as also the authenticity of his experiment with sexual continence; and in typical fashion, he wrote to his disciples and co-workers candidly informing them that he “would not be taking service” from female disciples like Nayyar and Narayan, even though both “took the decision very badly” and Gandhi was compelled into review his stance (431). A few weeks later, he wrote to Sushila Nayyar once again saying that he had “more or less decided” that “with the
exception of Ba” he would not accept “from any other woman” any service “involving physical contact” (433). Such service typically comprised “preparing and serving his meals, assisting with his bath and giving him an oil massage” (433). Gandhi had hitherto gotten used to taking a bath “in the presence of others, including women” in the ashram like Nayyar, Narayan, Amrit Kaur andAmtus Salaam (395). In a letter to Balwantsinha, a co-worker, he reiterated that he was “used to bathing in the nude” in the presence of “some women,” and while he would like to “give up physical contact” with the likes of Sushila Nayyar and Kasturba, it would cause them “deep hurt” which he would like to avoid (433).

He added in the same letter that he had caused his wife “much pain,” and he had “no courage nor any desire to inflict any further pain on her” (433). Gandhi mentions the fact that he had decided to stop all “personal services” from Sushila Nayyar, but within twelve hours his “soft-heartedness” put an end to any such plan, as he “could not bear the tears of Sushila and the fainting away of Prabhavati,” clear signs of the mutuality of his relationships with the said women. Rajmohan Gandhi indicates that Kasturba herself, in the spirit of Gandhi’s overarching philosophy of Brahmacharya and truth within the ashram life, and in the knowledge of the affection and devotion the younger women in the community felt for her husband, encouraged the Mahatma “to take service from the girls” offering insights into the “remarkable trust, respect and affection” between husband and wife (434). Further, he says that in “[s]triving to be womanlike,” Gandhi felt part of an “intimate, feminine circle,” where he found “the love that helped him fight his outer battles” (434). In Bapu – My Mother, Manu Gandhi too says that during her teenage years, after the death of Kasturba, when the youngster wanted to be “closer to her mother than ever before,” Gandhi kept her “very close” and took interest in “the minutest details of her life, such as “food, clothes, sickness, my visits and companions, my studies,” and even “whether I thoroughly washed my hair every week,” an interest he kept alive till the end of his life, calling himself her “mother” repeatedly through the time they spent together in Noakhali (Manu Gandhi 10). In a speech he gave in Pakhtun country in the North-West Frontier Province in 1938, Gandhi recalled his younger life as a “tyrant at home,” who “let loose my anger” on a wife who bore it “meekly and uncomplainingly,” even as believed he was “her lord and master, in everything” (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 419). Tracing the trajectory of their long marriage, Gandhi added that it was Kasturba’s “unresisting meekness” that slowly made him recognise that he had “no such prescriptive right” over her, and that he would have to replace the need for abject and unquestioning obedience to persuasion by “patient argument” (420). In that regard, he said, Kasturba had become his “teacher in nonviolence” and exhorted the audience to take similar lessons from their “wives, mothers and sisters at home” (420).
On his visit to Sevagram in 1942, Louis Fischer observes that Gandhi ensured that “[i]t was not a glum community;” the patriarch “made eyes at the little children, provoked adults to laughter and joked with all and sundry visitors” (Fischer 465). During the same visit, he also noticed that despite his stringent beliefs in *Brahmacharya* and the desire to enforce it among his ashramites, Gandhi “loved children, and was never as happy as when he played with them;” he also “took time off to play with the youngsters and babies” of the community (268). Once, Gandhi took Fischer to a hut in the ashram that housed a “red wooden cradle” out of which a new mother lifted her baby to meet the septuagenarian, who “patted the child’s cheeks” and referred to her as his “relaxation” (268). When the baby “reacted gleefully” to his patting, Gandhi, says the biographer, “smacked and pinched it playfully,” revealing a tender, more nurturing side to his persona (268). Fischer says that Gandhi would regularly “amuse the children of the ashram by making funny faces at them and directing funny remarks to them” (269). In a throwback to his father Karamchand Gandhi, who helped his wife peel and cut vegetables, Fischer says that until he got too old, Gandhi “sat in the scullery every morning with the ashramites peeling potatoes,” in addition to helping with other sundry chores as well (269). Life in Sabarmati and later in Sevagram was, to the American biographer, “serene, simple, joyous and unconstrained” where nobody “stood in awe of Gandhi” (269). These remarks are vital to the study at hand, because they enable us to examine the complex nature of the Gandhi marriage, and the dynamic between the couple within the domestic arrangements of which each was an integral part in their nearly three decades in India from 1915 to 1942. More importantly, they allow us to see Kasturba in the light of the changing gender roles that Gandhi had brought into life in the ashram, an idea that he had already experimented with in good measure during the couple’s years in South Africa. His views on his wife had undergone an enormous transformation during this period, and yet, it is interesting to note that while one is able to assess those changes from the Mahatma’s perspective, his active participation in, and appropriation of, domestic affairs eclipses her persona even further. The next section of this chapter will examine the nature of Kasturba’s relationship with her husband in the last two years of her life.

3.5 THE FINAL YEARS: COHABITING IN INCARCERATION (1942-1944)

Unlike the previous sections which draw from all the auto/biographical texts under scrutiny in this study, this last section that discusses Kasturba’s final incarceration in Pune’s Aga Khan Palace from August 1942 to February 1944, will rely primarily on Sushila Nayyar’s memoir and Arun Gandhi’s biography of Kasturba, with inputs from Rajmohan Gandhi’s *Mohandas* owing to the lack of information in the other texts in this regard. When Sushila Nayyar and Kasturba reached the Aga Khan Palace on the night of August 9, 1942, in the wake of
massive arrests of the satyagrahis participating in the Quit India movement, Kasturba was extremely unwell, having spent one night at Arthur Road prison in Bombay, and another on the train to Poona, suffering acute diarrhoea and weakness (Nayyar 32). When they entered Gandhi’s room in the palace, he was “sitting on his bedding” with “a pencil in his hand,” “revising a draft” with Mahadev Desai, who was also in incarceration by his side (32). When Gandhi looked up and saw his wife, he “frowned,” wondering whether Kasturba had “weakened”, and “unable to bear the strain of being away from him,” made a request to the Government “to send her to him” (32). The idea that his wife had “sacrificed her duty to sentiment” was characteristically unpalatable to the Mahatma, even at the cost of his family’s health and emotional well being (32). Kasturba, who had been denied access to proper medical attention at Arthur Road, met Mr. Kateli, the jailer at Aga Khan Palace, who immediately arranged for Nayyar’s prescription to be “sent to the chemist with a cyclist” (33). However, Nayyar observes that Kasturba’s illness had been “of the nervous type,” and being with her husband “was medicine in itself” for her; consequently, her diarrhoea stopped with “one dose of medicine” (33). The very next day, Kasturba “got out of bed” and “started doing little things for Bapu” including fanning her husband during his massage to keep the mosquitoes from disrupting his sleep (33). Within a few days, she had “picked up fairly well,” says Nayyar, and “walked about the house, peeped into the kitchen,” and spent “a good deal of her time in worship and in the reading of prayer books” (34). The detainees at Aga Khan Palace were “a happy family,” adds the memoirist and time “did not hang heavily on anyone’s hands” (34).

On August 15, barely a week after the arrest and incarceration of the satyagrahis at Aga Khan, the Inspector-General of Prisons visited the “detention camp” for a routine inspection, where he met Mahadev Desai, Kasturba and Sarojini Naidu in the latter’s room, while Gandhi received his morning massage from Sushila Nayyar in the “improvised massage room on the verandah,” when suddenly the “laughter” coming from Naidu’s room stopped, and Kasturba came rushing to get Nayyar saying Mahadev Desai had had “a fit” (34). However, by the time Nayyar reached him, Desai had “no pulse” and “no heartbeat;” his “breathing was heavy and laboured” and his limbs convulsed (35). Gandhi, who had been sent for, and Kasturba tried to reach out to Desai, but it was too late; he had succumbed to a massive heart attack. He was fifty years old. Nayyar says that for Kasturba, this was a “bolt from the blue,” and while she attempted to remain brave, and joined in the prayers, the “stream of tears” continued (35). “Why should Mahadev have gone and not I,” she is said to have asked repeatedly at his cremation on the palace grounds that evening (35). In a “detailed telegram” for Desai’s wife and son, Gandhi documents the events of the day following the former’s demise (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 499). “Sushila and I bathed the body,” he writes, after which Desai’s remains lay “peacefully covered with flowers,
incense burning” while Nayyar and he sat “reciting the Gita” (499). Saying that Desai had died a “yogi’s and patriot’s death,” he advises the latter’s wife, Durga not to allow for any sorrow, but to feel “only joy over such [a] noble death” (499). Through the rest of his incarceration at the Aga Khan Palace, Gandhi “walked twice a day” to the spot where Desai was cremated “to lay flowers there” (499). Following Desai’s death, the government allowed Pyarelal, Sushila’s older brother to join the detainees at the palace to serve as Gandhi’s assistant. Kasturba viewed the untimely death of Desai, who was a Brahmin by birth, as an “evil omen” which rested on the shoulders of his colleagues, a belief she was unwilling to shake off for the rest of her imprisonment (Nayyar 35). A feeling of “deep depression” loomed over the camp over the next few days, which Gandhi attempted to dispel by exhorting his fellow detainees to keep themselves so busy that there would be no time left “for idle thought, depressing or otherwise” (36).

To that extent, he set out a “timetable” for everyone in the prison, which included a resumption of Kasturba’s lessons in “Guj[ā]rati, Gita, geography, and sometimes history” (36). During his hours of rest in the afternoon, he “read out something or other to her and explained its meaning,” all of which Kasturba attempted to absorb with the “enthusiasm and eagerness of a young student,” even though she struggled to “learn new things” at her advanced age (36). Nayyar says that “as a general rule,” Kasturba could not remember the answers to questions that Gandhi asked her from the previous day’s lesson, and while he “never scolded her” for it, Kasturba “felt it keenly and worked hard to learn her lessons better” (36). With Gandhi’s patient tutelage, which also included using an orange as the earth at meal times to explain “longitude, latitude and the equator,” she was able to understand the basic aspects of “natural geography” and even correct Pyarelal, when he made an error in teaching the concept to Manu Gandhi, who had been brought to the palace to serve as a nurse and companion to Kasturba” (36-7). Gandhi also used a “Guj[ā]rati 5th grade school reader” which contained “several poems and songs” to teach Kasturba two songs, which they would sing together “every night after the prayers,” leading Sarojini Naidu to call them “the honeymooning old couple” in jest (37). When Gandhi taught her the names of all the provinces in the country, followed by the names of all the big cities in each province, she tried to memorise them but “without much success,” and unable to “grasp the facts” when studying, “her enthusiasm began to wane” slowly, even though she did not altogether give up her studies (37). Her focus turned to memorising the Bhagvad Gita, which she recited with Nayyar every night, as a ritual, “almost to the very end” of her life (37). Nayyar says that Kasturba read newspapers or Anasakti Yog, “a devotional manual” aloud, in a “childlike fashion,” which Gandhi attempted to correct (37). The matriarch, however, did not take kindly to his intervention and stopped reading aloud. Revealing an interest in current affairs, she also had Sushila or Pyarelal read out sections of the
newspaper to her every afternoon (37). Nayyar notes, that after Desai’s death, Kasturba would accompany her husband on his morning and evening walks, but gave up on the routine within “a month or so” following complaints of “pain in her chest,” which confined her activity to a “short stroll in the verandah” (37).

An episode that finds mention both in Nayyar’s memoir and Arun Gandhi’s biography of Kasturba involves her desire for a notebook to practise writing. Nayyar says that Kasturba’s handwriting being “childish,” she wrote “each letter of the alphabet separately,” with the spacing between letters so “irregular,” that an “unaccustomed reader” would find it hard to make out the words in her scrawl (38). In an attempt to get her to improve her writing, Gandhi, says Nayyar, asked her to practise the skill. Since all the other detainees “had sent for notebooks,” Kasturba too asked for one. According to Arun Gandhi, his grandmother approached Gandhi with the request at “an inopportune moment,” when the Mahatma was preoccupied with the way things were shaping up” in the country, adding to which Kasturba, to his annoyance, “had not done her lessons correctly” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 297). There is a variation in Nayyar’s and Arun Gandhi’s representation of the event. Nayyar says that Gandhi handed his wife “three or four loose sheets of paper” and asked her to practise on those, saying “I shall get you a notebook when you show some improvement” (Nayyar 38). Arun Gandhi says that Kasturba, up until that point, “plodded with her writing skills on a slate” in order “to conserve paper,” and Gandhi in response to her request for a notebook said, “I’ll get you a notebook when you learn to write properly,” and “[u]ntil then, you must use the slate” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 297). Arun Gandhi also qualifies the tone of his grandfather’s remark as “caustic,” saying it “cut Kasturba to the bone” (297). Nayyar’s version of Gandhi’s comment does not sound as harsh as the one presented by Arun Gandhi, but she does say that Kasturba “was deeply hurt,” as a result of which Gandhi “saw his mistake,” even though “it was difficult to heal the wound” (Nayyar 297). Arun Gandhi says his grandmother “placed her slate on Mohandas’s table” and “resolutely” said that she was “done with my lessons for life” and “walked out of the room” even as her husband “tried to make amends” to no avail (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 297). According to Nayyar, Sarojini Naidu “sent for a notebook” which Nayyar took to Kasturba, who “quietly put it away among Bapu’s books,” and despite Gandhi’s attempts to persuade her to the contrary, said, “[w]hat do I need a notebook for?” with “calm dignity” (Nayyar 38).

Arun Gandhi says that it was Pyarelal who tried to “soothe her ruffled feelings” by “giving her a notebook as a gift,” but Kasturba knew “where it came from,” implying that it was her husband who had sent it to her (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 297). Placing the notebook on Gandhi’s desk, Arun Gandhi says, she asked, “[w]hat does an illiterate like me need a notebook for?” which marked the end of her education, despite “numerous apologies”
tendered by her husband (297). The notebook, says Kasturba’s biographer grandson, remained in Gandhi’s possession till the day he died, as “a grim reminder of his indiscretion,” (297). Kasturba used her time in the Aga Khan Palace to familiarise herself with Tulsidas’s Ramayan, two stanzas of which would be read every evening during prayer (Nayyar 38). Gandhi would often “[explain] the meaning of the verses” after the prayer session, to which Kasturba “would listen with rapt attention,” exercising her “critical faculty” by asking pertinent questions during the explanation (38). Just as in life, Kasturba, says Nayyar, observed a fast on “Ekadashi day” in prison, in addition to which she fasted “every Monday, particularly on Purnima (full moon day) and Amavasya (no moon day), Janmashtami, Shivaratari and so on,” with some fasts arriving consecutively over two or three days” (39). In a throwback to descriptions of Putliba in Gandhi’s autobiography, Nayyar says that Kasturba “never thought of interrupting her fasts because of poor health or physical weakness” (39). She also fasted “without fail” on “Independence Day, National Week,” and “Quit India Day” (39). Kasturba used to spin 300 to 500 rounds regularly, but ill health during her final incarceration prevented her from spinning too much. Nayyar says that after her first heart attack, it was difficult to “persuade her to give up spinning and moving about in the house,” and it took a warning from the Inspector-General of Prisons, who threatened to separate her from her husband by having her transferred to Yeravda, to get her to stay in bed in order to get physical rest. Nayyar says that around this time, Kasturba “got an idea that spinning produced heart attacks” as a result of which, she gave up spinning for good, despite attempts by her fellow detainees to persuade her to spin occasionally “to distract her mind from the thoughts of her own illness” (41).

Nayyar believes that despite six decades with her husband, Kasturba had not completely set aside her caste consciousness. While Nayyar says that she treated Lakshmi, the daughter of Dudabhai and Danibehn, as her own, she still had “a deep reverence” for Brahmins, which was reflected in her attitude towards a Brahmin sepoy at the Aga Khan Palace, who was entrusted with work in the prison kitchen since he knew cooking (Nayyar 41). The memoirist recounts how Kasturba “had a soft spot in her heart” for the sepoy and “often gave him fruits and milk,” in addition to which she would refrain from scolding him if he made any mistakes, saying “[a]fter all, he’s a Brahmin lad” (41). When her visibly biased attitude led to “bad feelings” among the other soldiers, the Superintendent attempted to get her not to make exceptions for anybody, but Kasturba, says Nayyar, continued to feed the Brahmin sepoy on the sly, saying she gave him things “out of my own share” (42). Owing to his caste, she even asked him to predict when the prisoners at the Aga Khan Palace would be released and sent home, to which the inexperienced soldier, apparently, had no response (42). Unlike her previous imprisonments, where Kasturba found herself surrounded by friends with whom she found “plenty of company,” this time, according to Nayyar, she was “confined to
a small party” of people who “rendered what service was required,” and then occupied
themselves with “whatever work each one had found for him or herself” (43). This left
Kasturba feeling lonely, and without the company of her friends in the ashram, and even as
she tried to keep herself occupied in “reading and writing,” she “could not do it for long,”
often becoming “thoughtful” (43). When Gandhi decided to go on a twenty-one day fast, his
fellow detainees, including Kasturba were very worried about his health. When Sarojini
Naidu told Gandhi that his decision to fast was likely to “kill” Kasturba with worry, the
patriarch replied saying he knew his wife better than anyone else, and they had no idea how
“brave” she could be (43). He recalled how during his fast against a separate electorate for
untouchables, when he had “lost all hope of life,” he had his wife by his side (46).

Expe

cting the end, he “decided to distribute my few belongings amongst the hospital staff,”
and assigned the task to Kasturba, who “carried out my wishes” and distributed his things
“with her own hands;” more importantly, even as she went about this duty, “her eyes,” said
Gandhi, “were dry” (46). Nayyar refers to a corresponding entry by Kasturba in her diary in
1933, which recounts with an understated simplicity, her actions at the time of Gandhi’s
fast. “I had packed the things in a basket,” it reads, “Bapuji told me to give everything to the
hospital,” and “I did so” (46). She follows it up with words of faith saying, “God is merciful,”
and has “always come to the rescue of his devotees,” and so “His will be done” (46). Nayyar
says that even in 1942, ten years after the fast to which Gandhi referred, his “estimate of
Ba’s endurance and faith” turned out to be accurate (46). In her memoir she says that he
“talked to her” about the “necessity of going on a fast” one evening, and the following
morning, Kasturba decreed that her husband could not “protest against [the] Government’s
terrorism” if he did not go on a fast, leaving her colleagues “dumbfounded” (47). Arun
Gandhi explains his grandmother’s stance in this regard saying she supported her husband
in the capacity of a “dutiful, doting wife,” even as she “expressed her concern about his
health” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 298). During the grueling fast, she “gave up having full
meals,” and went on “a diet of fruits and milk,” which the others persuaded her to take at
least twice in twenty-four hours owing to her failing health (Nayyar 47). In the second week
of Gandhi’s fast, the government “opened the palace gates to all” as a result of which
“hundreds of people poured into the grounds and silently passed by Mohandas’s room,”
where they saw him asleep on a cot, “his breathing labo[u]red,” and yet remained assured
that his “spirit was still unyielding” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 300). Nayyar says that
Kasturba was “amazingly brave” through the twenty-one days of Gandhi’s fast (Nayyar 49).
Whether she was “talking to the visitors,” or “ministering to Gandhiji,” she remained
“cheerful and smiling” (49). Among the thousands who came to the Aga Khan Palace were
Kasturba’s children and grandchildren, whose presence was “a great solace” to the
matriarch (49).
Nayyar believes that while Kasturba had “adopted the whole world as her family” in keeping with her husband’s beliefs, her children remained “nearest and dearest to her,” another indication that while she attempted to comply with the ideas and philosophy he espoused, as in the case of untouchability, Kasturba had been unable to internalise it with the clarity and conviction that Gandhi did (49). Under Gandhi’s instructions, none of the visitors during this time were allowed to be served refreshments of any kind, a rule that Kasturba found hard to observe “especially with regard to her little grandchildren,” but she adhered to it “literally” in order to stay true to Gandhi’s vision (49). Nayyar also recalls that when the Government closed the gates of the palace to visitors on the penultimate day of Gandhi’s fast, Kasturba’s “eyes were moist” as she took leave of friends and compatriots of the Sabarmati Ashram, saying “[t]his is my final goodbye, friends” and even as Sushila Nayyar hurried to correct her, she remained unconvinced she would leave this prison alive (49). Upon the end of fast, even as Gandhi was “on the mend,” his wife “began to fade” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 300). She suffered repeated attacks of “paroxysmal tachycardia,” which exacerbated her ill health, and as Gandhi began to wonder if their confinement would continue for the next seven years, Kasturba’s “childlike simplicity and innocent faith” saw her praying before “the image of Balkrishna” and begging for “an early release for everyone” (Nayyar 50). It was then, on Kasturba’s request that the Gandhis’ fifteen-year-old grand-niece, Manu, the daughter of Jaisukhlal Gandhi, “one of Ota Gandhi’s numerous descendants” joined the detainees at the Aga Khan Palace to assist the ailing matriarch (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas 509). Manu’s transfer from a prison in Nagpur to the Aga Khan Palace, says Arun Gandhi, was a “timely move,” because Kasturba was stricken with “a mild attack of bronchial pneumonia” during which the teenager proved to be “an excellent nurse and a devoted companion” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 300). Nayyar says that as Gandhi recuperated from his fast, he began to devote more time to “correspondence with the Government,” which left him “very little time for teaching Ba” or “attending to other things” (Nayyar 51). A confidential report submitted by the prison officer Ardeshir Kateli to his superiors, reproduced in Rajmohan Gandhi’s Mohandas, offers us telling insights into Gandhi’s schedule even during confinement towards the end of 1943.

Gandhi, says the report, “discusses political questions” with “other inmates” like Pyarelal, Madeleine Slade (Mirabehn), Sushila Nayyar and occasionally, with Dr. Gilder (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 508). Detailing his routine, it says that he wakes up at around 6.30 a.m. and after his “morning ablution and breakfast,” he reads “books or newspapers” (508). At 8.15 a.m., he goes for his “morning walk” accompanied by “Pyarelal and Misses Slade, Nayyar and Manu” followed by a massage for forty-five minutes by Doctors Gilder and Nayyar (508). At lunch time between 11.15 to 12 noon, “Miss Slade talks or reads books to
him” (508). This is followed by an hour-long class in Sanskrit with Sushila Nayyar, and then another hour during which her brother, Pyarelal, “reads papers to him and discusses several points arising from the papers” as Gandhi sits, “either spinning or filing cuttings from the papers” (508). At 3.00 p.m., Gandhi takes up Manu’s lessons for an hour, after which he dedicates another hour and a half to “indexing newspaper cuttings on various subjects,” with help from Pyarelal, Sushila and Dr. Gilder (508). At 5.30 p.m., Mirabehn reads papers to Gandhi and “discusses on various political and other subjects” (508). This is followed by an “evening walk with other inmates in the garden,” followed by more spinning, the evening prayer and more reading and discussion with Pyarelal and Sushila Nayyar from 9.00 to 10.00 p.m., which is when he goes to bed (508). This report is interesting to this study, because it makes absolutely no mention of Kasturba even within the ambit of Gandhi’s domestic routine. Equally importantly, one is left with the distinct feeling that she played no role of significance in matters of Gandhi’s political ideology, something he was able to share with keenness and regularity with his other incarcerated colleagues. Kasturba’s absence from this report could also be owing to her illness, which curtailed her physical activity severely and kept her confined to chairs and beds for rest. She died just over two months after the report was filed by Kateli. Nayyar’s memoir says that despite Gandhi’s inability to spend time with Kasturba a few months before her demise, she had “varied interests” including watching games like Badminton, which the other inmates played quite regularly in the gardens, as Kasturba sat in her chair on the verandah, and watched the game “with keen interest,” calling out anyone who attempted to cheat or break the rules of the game (Nayyar 51).

At night, Mirabehn, Dr. Gilder and the prison superintendent, Mr. Kateli would play Karrom, which Kasturba took to playing herself, as the fourth member at the board; offering testament to her fascination for the game, and her tenacity to learn, Nayyar says that she would practise “for nearly half an hour every afternoon” (52). Paired with Mirabehn, who was “the best Karrom player” of the four, Kasturba was inevitably on the team that won, and if they “accidentally lost,” she would be so upset that it even “spoilt her sleep,” owing to which the other players made a tacit pact to ensure that Kasturba “should be made to win the last game” (52). According to Nayyar, she would lose herself in Karrom to the extent that she would “forget all about her illness” during the game, and even when she was too ill to play towards the end, her fellow players moved the Karrom table to her room so she could watch the game being played, which “cheered her up” (52). Two more instances cited by Nayyar are revelatory of Kasturba’s character, and both involve food. Kasturba was an “excellent cook,” whose talents in the culinary department were set aside following Gandhi’s introduction of the “vow of control of the palate” in their various ashrams, and yet, she would still occasionally “prepare something nice,” including interesting eats for Dr.
Gilder’s breakfast in the Aga Khan Palace (52). On one occasion, says Nayyar, Kasturba wanted Manu to prepare “Puran Puri” for everyone including her husband and herself, but Gandhi, knowing that “[a]n attack of indigestion was likely to bring on a heart attack in [Kasturba’s] case,” said that he would partake of the dish she was getting prepared, only if she agreed not to eat it. Kasturba replied in the affirmative “without a moment’s hesitation,” presenting her in the light of someone who could make cheerful personal sacrifices for her husband, if she could make him happy (52). In the second instance, Kasturba, who was recovering from a heart attack suffered the previous day, felt the urge to eat egg-plant cooked “in a special way in butter,” and asked Manu to prepare the dish for her, only to be advised against it for medical reasons by Sushila Nayyar (52). Angry at being refused her one request, says Nayyar, she tried to take up the matter with Gandhi, who, preoccupied with other affairs, brusquely told her to “control your palate for the sake of your health,” which stung her enough to for her to decide that she would “not have any cooked food” (53).

Even as Manu and Sushila pleaded with her to reverse her decision, she was “not going to be pacified so easily,” and consumed nothing but “milk, fruits, hot water and honey” for a fortnight, much to the anxiety of her two wards, who voiced their concern to Gandhi (53). The patriarch comforted them saying that her fruit and milk diet would not affect her health adversely, and was likely to do her good. Over time, with regular persuasion, says Nayyar, Kasturba “forgot the egg-plant story,” and returned to her usual diet (53). While the first instance showcases Kasturba’s continuing devotion to her husband, the second reveals a more childlike nature in her advanced age, with the need for affirmation and affection, and the yearning for the occasional culinary treat despite Gandhi’s imposition of stringent rules, a desire, perhaps, to militate against the severity of their existence. One anecdote available in Mukul Kalarthi’s *Ba and Bapu*, plays out on the day of Dr. Gilder’s twenty-ninth wedding anniversary, for which he received “as a gift a parcel of mangoes” (Kalarthi 49). The occasion prompted Kasturba to ask her husband how many years ago they had gotten married, to which Gandhi “burst into laughter” and teased Kasturba in front of the others asking if she too wanted to celebrate their wedding anniversary (49). Everyone joined in the laughter, says Kalarthi, including Kasturba, though she was not amused initially by her husband’s flippancy (49). Nayyar says that during their imprisonment, owing to the Government’s authoritarian attitude towards the nature of the content in letters the prisoners wished to write to friends and family, Gandhi had decided not to write to his acquaintances and dear ones in the outside world. Sushila and Pyarelal Nayyar, in an attempt to follow in his footsteps, also decided not to write to their mother. Kasturba, however, in an exercise of her individual ideas in this matter, “started writing letters” to her children, grandchildren and other relatives from whom she felt “cut off” at the Aga Khan Palace (55). She would
dictate her letters to Sushila, who would write them down for her, and even tried to “persuade” the latter to follow her example and write to her mother saying, “Bapuji is a Sadhu,” who had “broken worldly bonds,” a “state” she admitted she and the others had “not reached” (56). When Nayyar continued to demur, Kasturba began to write to her son Devadas, who lived close to Nayyar’s mother in Delhi, giving him and his family “detailed news” about Pyarelal and Sushila which could then be conveyed to their family members (56).

When Pyarelal and Sushila lost their sister-in-law to childbirth, Kasturba suggested to Gandhi that he request the Government to release Sushila so she could go and be with her mother and brother and offer assistance in care giving to the newborn, which Gandhi refused, but she did convince him to ask the Nayyar siblings to write to their mother and brother offering comfort “under the special circumstances” that had arisen in their family, and even offered to look after the infant if she could be sent to the Ag Khan Palace (57). The concluding chapter of Nayyar’s memoir is largely dedicated to the last two months of Kasturba’s life. By December of 1943, around the time that Mr. Kateli wrote the report discussed earlier, Kasturba’s health had taken a turn for the worse, as her “breathlessness” began interfering with her nightly sleep (57). An adjustable bed was gotten for her, so she could “sit up or recline at any angle she liked,” but as her condition deteriorated, they got a “small wooden table” made for her, which was “put on her bed across her legs,” on which “she would rest her arms,” and then “put her head on her arms and go to sleep” (57). Nayyar says that after his wife’s death, Gandhi “kept the table with him,” wherever he went, and at mealtimes, “it served as his table” (57). The Government’s apathy towards her ailment, its delay in sending medical help despite Gandhi’s repeated requests, its inefficiency in arranging for professional nurses for the patient, and the various kinds of treatments that Kasturba underwent, including allopathy under the advice of her immediate physicians, Dr. Gilder and Sushila Nayyar, nature care from Dr. Dinshaw Mehta, more ayurvedic treatment at the hands of a “vaidya,” Shiv Sharma of Lahore, and hydropathy under the supervision of Gandhi himself, have been painstakingly documented through the chapter. The inmates at Aga Khan Palace recognised that the “chief aggravating cause” of Kasturba’s illness was “confinement,” and through several written requests, Gandhi was able to arrange for the arrival of seasoned ashramite, Prabhavati Narayan and the Gandhis’ grandson, Kanu, to join the detainees in looking after Kasturba (58). He also wrote repeatedly to the Government, which eventually conceded to “weekly interviews” with family members, including Ramdas and Devadas Gandhi, among others, to relieve the oppression and monotony she felt over being detained in prison for what seemed like an “indefinite period” (58). As the end approached, Devadas, their youngest son, was allowed daily visits to his mother.
The Gandhis’ oldest and estranged son, Harilal, visited the Aga Khan Palace to see his mother on February 17, 1944, five days before her death, which “pleased” her because she saw him after a long spell, and also angered her, because she felt the Government was acting in a discriminatory fashion between her two sons, by allowing Devadas to visit every day, and giving Harilal permission to see his mother only once (62). Rajmohan Gandhi says that on that first occasion of Harilal’s visit, Kasturba was “overjoyed,” because three out of her four sons were visiting her together; he also refers to Sushila Nayyar’s observation from In Gandhi’s Mirror, where she describes how Gandhi “came and stood by, watching the three brothers having [a] meal together” (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 514). It was a sight, says the biographer, that Gandhi “had not seen for decades,” his “silence” bearing testimony “of how moved he was” (514). Arun Gandhi says that despite visits from her younger sons, Harilal and Manilal were “achingly present” in Kasturba’s thoughts (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 302). The Phoenix Settlement, where his father was working on keeping Indian Opinion alive and relevant, had been receiving “frequent” letters from Kasturba, who had spent several years there (302). These letters, says her biographer grandson, indicate that Kasturba was “obviously well informed about events in South Africa,” and made references to “some legal and political problems” Manilal Gandhi was undergoing, brought on “by his editorials” in the newspaper in the summer of 1943 (302). When Kasturba received special permission to see Harilal Gandhi again the following day, no one could find his whereabouts. Nayyar says that she asked for her eldest son every day, and every day she received a reply saying “he could not be traced” (62). Harilal had “disappeared once more,” says Arun Gandhi, “presumably on a drunken binge,” as his mother “tried to put this devastating disappointment out of her mind” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 305). When Gandhi’s old associate in South Africa, Jailbait Rustomji, attempted to arrange “passage to India” for Manilal and his wife, Sushila, he was prevented by Gandhi in a “terse” cable that read “Thanks. Ba slowly going. Manilal Sushila should continue their work” (305).

During the last days of Kasturba’s illness, Gandhi “lived on a liquid diet,” his wife’s condition having put a tremendous “strain on his mind;” he could not afford to spend “half to three quarters of an hour on taking his meal,” and so he would finish his liquid meal in ten minutes after his bath, and promptly come to sit with Kasturba for long spells in the day (Nayyar 63). Arun Gandhi adds that Kasturba “would doze off, her hand in his, her head resting on his chest; waking to find him still there, motionless” (304). When Harilal Gandhi was eventually found, and rushed to the Aga Khan Palace, he was “dirty, dishevelled, reeking of alcohol, and scarcely able to stand upright” (305). In Arun Gandhi’s description, when Kasturba’s oldest son “lurched into his mother’s room,” he was “incapable of any emotion beyond anger at having been so rudely snatched from his dissolute rounds;”
Kasturba never having seen her son “in this drunken condition” was “overcome with despair;” and “moaning piteously, she beat her forehead with her hands,” following which Harilal was hustled “out of the room, out of the palace, out of her life” (305). Nayyar, who witnessed the incident first hand, offers a more prosaic and concise account, saying Kasturba was “deeply grieved” at the sight of her son, and “she began to beat her forehead,” as a result of which Harilal “had to be removed from her sight” (Nayyar 64). It is to Devadas, that she is said to have bequeathed the responsibility of looking after the family, the day after she last saw Harilal (64). “Bapuji is a saint,” she is to have said to her youngest son, “he has to think of the whole world,” and with Harilal in a dissolute state, she felt that the “care of the family” had to fall in Devadas’s lot (64). On February 22, Gandhi fed Kasturba a spoonful of “gangajal” which Devadas had brought for her, which, according to Nayyar, “gave her great peace of mind” (Nayyar 66). Devadas had brought to the Aga Khan Palace, the newly introduced penicillin, which he had “managed to import” for the treatment of his mother (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas 514). However, Gandhi prevailed upon his son, Dr. Gilder and Sushila Nayyar not to administer the drug to Kasturba, because it was “untested,” in addition to which the injections “would be hard for her to bear” serving only to increase her agony late into her illness; arguments to which “the son yielded,” albeit reluctantly (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas 514).

Just as Gandhi was leaving for his evening walk the same day, Kasturba called out to him looking “very restless” (Nayyar 68). When she tried to sit up, Gandhi advised her to continue lying down, and so, she “put her head on his lap and lay back” (68). Nayyar describes the end in a series of succinct images; Kasturba’s “eyes began to lose their lustre,” following which there were a “few hiccups and gurgling sounds from the throat,” and finally “she opened her mouth” to let out “three or four gasps,” after which “all was still” (68). Kasturba was, in the memoirist’s words, “free from all bondage” (68). Gandhi assisted Santokben, Manu and Sushila Nayyar in bathing the body, and wrapping her up in “the sari made of Gandhiji’s yarn,” which Kasturba had “designed for her last journey,” as Mirabehn arranged flowers “in her hair and around the head” (68). At the funeral arranged near the site where Mahadev Desai was cremated in the Aga Khan Palace grounds, family and friends gathered early the next morning. Gandhi “took his seat” near his wife’s head in her room and remained there “till she was taken for cremation” (70). After the body “was placed on the funeral pyre” Gandhi offered a short invocation comprising bits of “Hindu, Muslim, Christian and Parsi prayers,” after which Devadas “lighted the fire” (70). The patriarch stayed near the burning pyre from 7.00 am to 4.00 pm, and when it was suggested that he leave to take rest, he is supposed to have said in some jest, “How can I leave her after like this after sixty-two years of companionship? I am sure she would not forgive me for that” (70). Later that evening, as he finally retired for the day, he is said to have lamented that his wife was
indeed “an indivisible part of me,” and her going had “left a void which will never be filled” (70). The final comment is telling because it offers a complement and contrast to his earlier comment in the introduction to Nayyar’s memoir on how Kasturba lost herself in him. The complex dynamic between Gandhi and Kasturba and the representation/construction thereof will be explored further in the next chapter which engages in the close reading of key incidents in the life of Kasturba that have been discussed in detail in Gandhi’s autobiography and/or the other biographies that have been studied as primary texts for the purposes of this study.
CHAPTER IV
MULTIPLE SUBJECTIVITIES:
A CLOSE READING OF BIOGRAPHICAL ELEMENTS ON KASTURBA

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter will examine five key incidents in which Kasturba Gandhi is regularly mentioned in the auto/biographical texts under scrutiny in this study. The first incident involves the cleaning of the chamber pot in the Gandhi house in Durban in 1898 over which Gandhi and Kasturba endured a contest of individual wills. The second incident revolves around Kasturba fighting with her husband over the returning of jewels and other expensive gifts given to them by members of the Indian community in Durban when they first planned a return to India in 1901. The third episode involves the situation of Gandhi’s illness in Gujarat in 1918, when Kasturba prevailed upon him to start consuming goat’s milk, despite his vow to abstain from drinking milk of any kind. The fourth incident examines her encounter with her oldest son Harilal through the window of a train at Katni station around 1936. The last incident to be studied concerns Kasturba’s transgression of Gandhi’s diktat regarding caste reform when she and Durga Desai entered the Puri Jagannath temple, which practised notions of untouchability, in 1938. A close reading of concerned passages in the auto/biographical source material examined for the purposes of this study that choose to carry these incidents will enable us to unpack the text and analyse the different representations/constructions of Kasturba in these books. Equally importantly, it will allow us to address the multiple subjectivities that emerge of the protagonist under investigation, and also how the gender and cultural proclivities of the biographers inform their understanding of Kasturba’s subjectivity. Some of these incidents have been described in great detail in Gandhi’s autobiography, which serves as a primary text, to which the others, upon further research, have added their own commentaries. Further, earlier biographies such as those written by Louis Fischer (1951) and Judith Brown (1990) and the memoir by Sushila Nayyar (1948), might offer insights at variance with those offered by later biographies written by Rajmohan Gandhi (1995, 2006), Arun Gandhi (1998) and Ramachandra Guha (2013). In the process, we will be able to uncover the various silences and exclusions embedded in the representation/construction of her persona in the texts under examination.
4.2 CLEANING THE CHAMBER POT OF THE CLERK IN BEACH GROVE VILLA, DURBAN (1898)

It could be argued, that the reason why the incident involving the cleaning of the chamber-pot in Gandhi's plush Beach Grove Villa in Durban finds repeated mention across biographies both on Gandhi and Kasturba, is because Gandhi himself dedicates an entire chapter to it in his autobiography, titled 'A Sacred Recollection and Penance' indicating both reverence for the lessons learnt through the incident and penitence for its occurrence (M. K. Gandhi 231). Written, like the rest of his autobiography, with the desire to instruct those who wish to follow in his footsteps, and the need to atone for what he sees, retrospectively, as grave personal and ideological errors, the chapter is laced with pedantry and guilt. The episode of the chamber-pot has been re-constructed for the readers from Gandhi's memory of it, over two-and-a-half decades after it originally took place in 1898, and as a key participant in, and principal documenter of, the incident, it is, demonstrably, his perspective and consciousness that pervade its narration. And since there were no witnesses to what was, clearly, a domestic dispute, it is his authorial voice that subsequent researchers have turned to, in order to understand and reproduce its narrative in their biographies. Early on we are told that Gandhi knew "no distinction" between relatives and strangers, countrymen and foreigners, white and coloured, Hindus and Indians of other faiths, whether Musalmans, Parsis, Christians or Jews" (231). He adds that his heart is "incapable" of making such distinctions, and this inclusiveness is "in my very nature" and not "a result of any effort on my part" (231). These binary categories, at the outset, however, do not include "men and women," and given as the chapter involves only himself and his wife, and taking into account Gandhi's socio-economic and cultural position as a man in the early twentieth century in India, as also his views on women at the time of writing his autobiography, it is not unfair to posit the breaking of this last diametrically opposed category of existence in a deeply patriarchal society, as its inherent 'lesson' to the reader. In keeping with his philosophy of equality and fraternity, Gandhi had introduced the custom of having his "office clerks" stay with him in his villa in Durban long before Kasturba and his children joined him in South Africa (231). He goes on to say that he treated them as "members of my family" and "had unpleasantness with my wife" if ever she "stood in the way of my treating them as such" (231).

Interestingly, we have no information on how Kasturba perceived what was clearly a breach in the orthodox caste and community consciousness in which they both had been raised and socialised, which might have offered researchers and readers alike a counter to her husband's hegemonic discourse with regard to their relationship. At the time of the occurrence of the incident under examination, Kasturba was, by all accounts, a traditional
Indian housewife, homemaker and mother, who had no authority to negotiate the underlying rules that ran the unconventional domestic establishment in an overwhelmingly foreign cultural ethos to which she had to accustom herself and her children. The narrative of the chapter then states that one of the clerks living under Gandhi's roof was a "Christian" who was "born of Panchama parents," a caste category that the likes of Kasturba would have been schooled into finding revolting to serve in any capacity (231). Even as the clerk, whom we are told in later biographies on the Mahatma, was called Vincent Lawrence, had converted to Christianity to combat the social stigma attached to his original religious and cultural identity, his status as a former 'untouchable' would still present tremendous socio-economic impediments in his growth as an individual in traditional Hindu society in India in the early twentieth century. These caste distinctions might have been far easier to ignore even for Gandhi in a foreign land, far away from the conservative environment of Rajkot. Built along the lines of “the Western model,” the house the Gandhis inhabited in Durban had “no outlets for dirty water,” with each room having its own chamber-pot for the use of its occupant (231). More importantly, Gandhi’s narrative tells us that “[r]ather than having these [chamber-pots] cleaned by a servant or sweeper,” which would have been customary in the land of his birth, “my wife or I attended to them” (231). While Kasturba evidently had been co-opted into Gandhi’s domestic philosophy, it is unclear whether she undertook this task out of a genuine need to participate in her husband’s caste reform, or out of the knowledge that exercising her volition as an economically dependent and culturally isolated spouse was not an option in their marriage where Gandhi was, unequivocally, the patriarch. Gandhi says that all the clerks in the establishment who “made themselves completely at home,” would “clean their own pots,” but in the case of Lawrence, who was “a newcomer” at the time, it was “our duty to attend to his bedroom,” asserting once again a common identity for himself and his wife as a married unit, through which his authorial voice makes rules and articulates them on her behalf, appropriating, in the process, the corresponding silence at her end of the narrative (231).

While “[m]y wife managed the pots of the others,” continues the Mahatma, the fact that she would have to clean the chamber-pot of a Panchama “seemed to her to be the limit” as a result of which the couple, in Gandhi’s words, “fell out” (231). Gandhi adds that Kasturba “could not bear” the idea of him cleaning the pots, even as she disliked “doing it herself,” an indication of Kasturba’s incorporation of patriarchal values that would compel her to sacrifice her own caste ethics, however flawed, to ensure that her husband was not inconvenienced or polluted by menial labour of this kind (231). Gandhi proceeds to present an affectionate “picture of her chiding me,” her eyes “red with anger, and pearl drops streaming down her cheeks, as she descended the ladder, pot in hand” (231). His contrition for his actions is evident in the next sentence, where he admits he was “a cruelly kind
husband,” one who “regarded myself her teacher,” and harassed Kasturba “out of my blind love for her” (231). It is a telling statement, and an indication that their marriage had undergone radical changes in the time since the occurrence of this incident. And yet his introduction to Sushila Nayyar’s memoir on Kasturba, and his letter to Lord Wavell upon Kasturba’s passing, point disconcertingly to Kasturba’s need and ability to “lose herself” in his persona, in a sustained manner through the course of their six decades of marriage, evidence that calls to question the nature of the remorse he felt with regard to this episode even at the time of writing this autobiography. As the narration of the incident progresses, he says that he was “far from being satisfied by [Kasturba’s] merely carrying the pot,” and that he would “have her do it cheerfully,” a self-conscious reference to his early chauvinism and the deep divide in their economic and social positions in the marriage, which drove him to raise his voice at Kasturba imperiously saying that he would “not stand this nonsense in my house” (232 italics mine). His words, says Gandhi, pierced the oppressed Kasturba “like an arrow,” and the description that follows reproduces the outburst of a spirited, albeit tired, Hindu housewife, who told him to “[k]eep your house to yourself and let me go” (232).

As the “spring of compassion dried up” in Gandhi, and he, catching Kasturba by the hand, “dragged the helpless woman to the gate,” proceeding to open it “with the intention of pushing her out,” tears [ran] down her cheeks in torrents,” he recollects, as she hurled a volley of questions at her insensitive husband (232). “Have you no sense of shame?” she cried, “Must you so far forget yourself? Where am I to go? I have no parents or relatives here to harbour me,” offering a succinct insight into her absolute isolation within Gandhi’s professional and social milieu in Durban (232). Standing up to his attempt at violence, she rallies back saying “[B]eing your wife, you think I must put up with your cuffs and kicks?” (232). Finally, in language that sounds less like an entreaty and more like a directive, she tells him to “behave yourself, and shut the gate” so the couple would not be found “making scenes like this” (232). Kasturba’s fight for reason and agency in their marriage come to us as re-constructed in Gandhi’s narrative voice, in an interesting and remarkable attempt to subvert conventional notions of patriarchy. He presents his wife’s perspective in a situation in which he was, visibly both trenchant and tyrannical, regardless of its impact on the construction of his self-image in the consciousness of the reader. And yet, the re-constructed conversation, by virtue of its not having emerged from Kasturba’s mind and consciousness, or her language and articulation, prevents us, yet again, from obtaining fuller insights into the actual register of the dispute between husband and wife. Questions abound with respect to the authenticity of the language and, consequently, the ferocity of the interaction, Kasturba’s ability and desire to confront her husband, and the degree of the physical aggression that he ostensibly visited upon her in order to exert his superiority. With
steadfast candor that characterises most of his autobiography, Gandhi admits to having “put on a brave face” despite his shame at Kasturba’s chastisement, and “shut the gate,” in recognition of the fact that if his wife could not leave him, “neither could I leave her” (232). He says that despite their “numerous bickerings,” the end had always been “peace between us,” adding contentiously that his wife, “with her matchless powers of endurance,” had always emerged “the victor” in their squabbles (232). This ‘endurance’ that he valorises several times in his description of Kasturba, always appears at the cost of her assertion of her own free will, and has contributed incalculably towards confining her within a stereotypical mould in the popular imagination.

More importantly, we do not know whether Gandhi, in an act of penitence, cleaned the chamber-pot himself, or whether Kasturba, in her desire to return to the stereotypical conformity this incident briefly unsettled, cleaned the offensive pot and made the sacrifice her husband demanded of her—and “cheerfully;” presenting us with another crucial silence in the narrative (232). In his autobiography, Gandhi says that he narrates the incident “with some detachment,” having “fortunately emerged” from a period where he was a “blind, infatuated husband” and no longer “my wife’s teacher” (232). “Kasturba can, if she will,” he states, “be as unpleasant to me today, as I used to be to her before,” attempting to present a more equitable status for both partners in the marriage as it stood in the 1920s (232). “We are tried friends,” he adds, “the one no longer regarding the other as the object of lust,” implicitly positing, once again, however, that following his vow of chastity, he had never been at the receiving end of Kasturba’s physical desire, thereby appropriating her voice and agency in articulating an extremely vital need or lack thereof (232). He also imprisons her further in the construct of a devoted, self-sacrificing and virtuous wife by calling her a “faithful nurse throughout my illnesses,” who served him selflessly, “without any thought of reward” (232). In 1898, when Gandhi had “no conception of Brahmacharya,” he believed that a wife, in addition to being “the object of the husband’s lust,” was “born to do her husband’s behest,” instead of being “a helpmate, a comrade and a partner in the husband’s joys and sorrows” (232). Whether the husband, in turn, was to serve as helpmate, comrade and partner in the wife’s joys and sorrows, regardless of whether his principles were in consonance with hers is left undiscussed. He also says that “with the gradual disappearance in me of the carnal appetite,” his domestic life “became and is becoming more and more peaceful, sweet and happy” (232). It positions the changes in him as central to the positive transformation in their marriage, and while that could be viewed as an admission of guilt on his part with regard to the persistent bouts of marital discord the couple suffered in their first two decades as man and wife, it also clearly effaces Kasturba’s individuality and her contribution to their growing mutual accord.
Gandhi ends the chapter on a cautionary note, saying that even at the time of writing the autobiography he and Kasturba were not to be construed as “an ideal couple,” or assumed by the reader to have “a complete identity of ideals” (233). Speaking on Kasturba’s behalf, he surmises that she “does not perhaps know whether she has any ideals independently of me” and it is “likely” that “many of my doings do not have her approval even today” (233).

In the context of their disagreement over the stigma surrounding untouchability, we know that Kasturba was coerced into accepting the Dhed family in the Kochrab Ashram in 1916 against her will, by a husband, who, despite his noblest intentions with regard to gender parity, calmly threatened to leave her if she did not perforce align her ideology on the matter with his; an incident with conflicting representations that has been discussed at some length in the previous chapter concerning the domestic universe of the Gandhis.

Another episode that occurred in 1938, a decade after the publication of Gandhi’s autobiography, which will be analysed later in this chapter, reveals that Kasturba’s views continued to remain at variance with those of her husband in the matter of caste-based discrimination, when she knowingly entered the Puri Jagannath temple to pay obeisance to the deity despite Gandhi’s eschewing of the said temple owing to its segregation of worshippers based on caste. The Mahatma’s comments on his wife’s ostensibly unformed ideals points to an important lacuna in his discourse on their evolving marriage. The consonance that grew during the more mature phase of their conjugal life could be attributed to Kasturba’s gradual willingness (or resignation) towards aligning herself, however superficially, with the ideals upheld by her husband in the interest of mutual peace; it could also have developed owing to Gandhi’s relentless and unilateral subsuming of his wife’s amorphous views on various issues under his more coherently developed ideas, however far removed they were from those of Kasturba. Without Kasturba’s authentic voice offering either agreement or challenge, it is difficult to assess the veracity of Gandhi’s remarks on his wife’s position with reference to any key belief, including the one that holds their marriage to be gender equitable. More damningly, he adds, that the two partners “never discuss [these ideals],” because he “sees no good in discussing them,” excluding his wife yet again from the dialogue involved in arriving at any decision of mutuality (233).

He blames the disparity between them on the fact that Kasturba was “educated neither by her parents nor by me at the time when I ought to have done it,” even as he concludes that she is “blessed with one great quality,” one which “most Hindu wives possess in some measure,” that of “willingly or unwillingly, consciously or unconsciously” considering herself “blessed in following in my footsteps,” as a result of which she has “never stood in the way of my endeavour to lead a life of restraint” (233). Whether this was indeed true, is certainly a matter for deeper analysis in another study, but in returning time and again to the notion of the ‘pativrata’ or the devout wife, in the narrative sections concerning Kasturba in his
autobiography, Gandhi constantly underscores the binary categories of ‘husband’ and ‘wife’ (and therefore ‘man and ‘woman’) despite his fervent attempts to dismantle conventional patriarchal notions concerning the positions occupied by men and women in marriage as a social, economic and cultural institution. Even as he strives to establish that he and Kasturba did in fact enjoy a life of “contentment, happiness and bliss,” regardless of the “wide difference” between the two of them, intellectually speaking, his imagining of a great marital ideal does not take into account his wife’s identity as a woman apart from her station as his spouse, and in choosing to articulate her ideas for her, however sympathetically, it could be argued that he undermines that identity and individuality even further (233). To his credit, Gandhi’s account of this incident is unerringly self-conscious and self-critical. He scrutinises his position as domineering and insecure husband with a searching curiosity, and a genuine desire for self-improvement. The penitential register and didactic undertone of the recollection certainly point to the Mahatma’s endeavour to make an example of his deeds, and more often, his misdeeds. The chapter, as also the rest of the autobiography, must also be viewed in the context of the time in which it was written. However, that it does co-opt Kasturba’s arguments, her articulation and her position on the matter of untouchability, becomes disturbingly clear through a close reading of its passages, marginalising, in the process, her distinct individuality.

Louis Fischer, unlike his subject, dedicates a succinct passage in his biography on Gandhi to the incident involving the chamber-pot. Beginning a page earlier with a quick introduction to their domestic life in Durban, he says that Gandhi was “constantly interfering in household matters,” a fact that “incensed” Kasturba (Fischer 81). In addition to considering himself her teacher, Gandhi “imposed new, rigid rules of behaviour” on his wife and children, and, in Fischer’s view, the “‘blind, infatuated’ love” Gandhi gave Kasturba was a “diminishing recompense for these tribulations” (81). Calling Gandhi “a very Hindu husband” during this period in the couple’s marriage, Fischer decries his subject’s deeply patriarchal attitude towards his wife, as also the community to which he belonged (82). Critiquing Gandhi’s comment about his behaviour as a “cruelly kind husband,” Fischer pithily surmises that “[a]t times, Kasturbai would have failed to notice the kindness” (82). The biographer discusses how Gandhi’s friends, and law clerks and assistants “whom he treated like sons,” lived with him in Durban, an indication of the former’s egalitarian and yet paternalistic disposition towards those who were not members of his immediate family (82). Fischer’s description of the incident at hand is written in a simple idiom and, unlike Gandhi’s uncharacteristically imaginative prose in the depiction of his wife’s anger and humiliation, addresses the two principal characters in the narrative with judicious distance. After establishing the lack of running water in the Gandhi household and the system of the chamber pots, Fischer specifically mentions that Gandhi would not employ “an untouchable ‘sweeper’ who in India
does all the ‘unclean’ tasks,” approaching the incident from the perspective of a cultural outsider who wishes to offer audiences from other societies an insight into the caste system that dominates the Hindu ethos, against which Gandhi, in the full understanding of his upper caste status, felt the need to protest (82). And so, “[h]e and Kasturbai carried out the pots,” says the American biographer, adding on behalf of Kasturba that “[s]he had no choice; he insisted,” a comment that indicates that the domestic relationship was driven entirely by the force of Gandhi’s persona (82). In another scathing indictment of the Hindu caste system, Fischer says that the clerk (not mentioned by name) who “had been an untouchable himself,” had converted to Christianity in order to “escape the ugly disabilities which Hindus inflict on their ‘outcasts’” (82).

Those disabilities notwithstanding, Fischer states that in Kasturba’s “orthodox” worldview, the clerk “remained an untouchable,” whose chamber-pot she “balked” at the prospect of cleaning; in fact, he says, she “hated the whole business,” and did not understand why “she, or her husband for that matter, should perform such tasks” (82). Gandhi, he continues, “compelled her to obey,” considering this “part of her ‘education,’” but she “cried and her eyes were red with tears” (82). Interestingly, while Fischer’s general sympathy, as an educated Western male writer, lies with Kasturba as is evident in his representation of her as an oppressed Hindu woman with no choice, his position as an outsider to the cultural canvas he attempts to document, prevents him from speculating about the motives that drove her beliefs with regard to caste, however toxic their impact on vast swathes of Hindu society. “Protest[ing]” against his wife’s unwillingness to comply with his caste reform, Gandhi “shouted” that he would not stand such “nonsense” in his house when he saw his wife “weep;” she, in return, “screamed” that he should keep his house and let her go (82). Fischer’s choice of verbs to portray the rising emotional cadence of the argument, using Gandhi’s “protested” and “shouted” as against Kasturba’s “screamed,” also highlights the latter’s ability to hold her own against her husband. When describing Gandhi’s rage upon encountering Kasturba’s rebellious words, the biographer breaks down the Mahatma’s original narration of the incident with terse economy, stripping it of the emotion with which it was recollected in the latter’s autobiography, saying Gandhi “grabbed her by the hand, dragged her to the gate, opened it and was about to push her out,” when he was chastised by his wife with the words “[h]ave you no shame?” which were “exclaimed through copious tears” (82). He also compresses the words with which Kasturba ostensibly castigated her husband in Gandhi’s autobiography. “Where am I to go?” she asks him, in Fischer’s version, “I have no parents or relatives here,” followed by which she orders him to “behave yourself and shut the gate,” and ends by saying “[l]et us not be found making scenes like this” (83). The biographer edits out the phrase “to harbour me” from the sentence about parents and relatives, removing, in the process, the potential for the reader to truly engage with
Kasturba’s loneliness in an alien environment, as also her precarious position as a woman, ironically, regardless of her caste, in the unforgivingly Hindu milieu in which she was raised, to uphold untouchability as a concept and practice, and serve her husband no matter what demands he made of her (M. K. Gandhi 232).

Fischer also takes out the crucial sentence where Kasturba asks her husband whether she was to put up with his “cuffs and kicks” just by virtue of being his wife, a moment where she genuinely rises above the constraints of her circumstances and education, and genuinely calls to question, however unwittingly, the nature of their marriage (232). Kasturba’s outcry, according to Fischer, “brought Gandhi to his senses,” but owing to paucity of source material, he too is unable to establish the tangible outcome of the standoff between Gandhi and Kasturba on what was clearly a definitive issue for both (82). He does, however, draw the reader’s attention to the fact that his principal subject “possessed a temper and a temperament,” and that his “subsequent Mahatma-calm was the product of training” (82). While he has no corresponding observation to make on Kasturba, this remark certainly attempts to present Gandhi in a human light, replete with flaws and foibles he had to work very hard to overcome, sometimes effectively, and at others, with next to no success at all. In modifying Kasturba’s words, Fischer once again brings to the fore the unreliable nature of auto/biographical writing, and its impact on the construction of ‘truth’ in the representation/ construction of subjects. The authenticity of Kasturba’s active voice in Gandhi’s autobiography is diminished further by his celebrated biographer’s attempt to discuss what he sees as a formative incident in the couple’s marriage, but within the constraints of a specific word limit, which condenses the episode, and perhaps, also robs it, and Kasturba, of genuine vitality and agency. Fischer’s economising on the representation of Kasturba might be legitimately rooted in a desire to maintain a clear focus on the subject of his study, namely Gandhi; treating his wife, therefore, as a valuable appendage to the protagonist, one through which expositions surrounding his life can be made with greater ease. In the process, however, readers and researchers alike are given next to no insights into her world or her consciousness. Fischer’s biography of Gandhi, first published in 1951, was also written at a time when Gandhi’s presence as a figure of national and international importance was only beginning to be explored by researchers around the world, barely three years after the Mahatma’s death.

To that extent, with the exception of his personal interaction with Gandhi over a week in 1942, and his concomitant observations of Kasturba during that time spent at Sevagram Ashram (there is no evidence in Fischer’s biography on Gandhi to suggest that he actively interacted with her), he did not have access to the wealth of academic knowledge and resources that have emerged in the sixty odd years since, including the *Collected Works of*
Mahatma Gandhi, all of which contribute to the exclusions and omissions in his writing, particularly with regard to the subject of this study. Unlike Gandhi, Fischer, obviously propelled by Western sensibilities, does not valorise Kasturba’s devotion to her husband. He views it dispassionately instead as a product of Indian patriarchy. He also, interestingly, refrains from commenting on Gandhi’s retrospective contrition and his altered views on women and marriage, some of which find expression at the end of the same chapter in the latter’s autobiography. Rajmohan Gandhi’s Mohandas also makes a reference to the “bitter exchange between Gandhi and Kasturba” over the incident concerning the chamber-pot (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 92). The biographer says that it was Gandhi’s “reformist zeal” that propelled him to unilaterally decide that “it was up to him or Kastur to take [the chamber-pot] down, empty and clean it, and bring it back to the clerk’s bedroom” (92). Rajmohan Gandhi also adds that while Kasturba had “acceded” to cleaning the chamber-pots of “some of the other lodgers,” the prospect of “carrying an ‘untouchable’s’ urine,” or “letting her husband carry it” was “too much” (92). The word “acceded” in the former sentence challenges Gandhi’s seemingly innocuous mention of how his wife “managed the pots of the others,” laying the ground for the reader to infer that the task of cleaning the chamber pot in itself was not offensive to Kasturba (M. K. Gandhi 231). Rajmohan Gandhi also refers to his grandmother as a “spirited wife” in the context of her retaliation to Gandhi’s insistence that she complete the chore with the requisite cheer (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 92). Gandhi’s biographer grandson also edits out a sentence from his grandmother’s monologue, where she ostensibly said she did not want them as a couple to be “found making scenes like this,” altering yet again, the texture of the representation of Kasturba’s articulation, and therefore, representation (M. K. Gandhi 232).

Rajmohan Gandhi also insightfully points out that this was not the first time that Kasturba had seen “her husband’s domineering face,” allowing the reader to assess it not as an isolated incident, but as one that was part of a repeated pattern (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 92). Though such moments were “mercifully short-lived,” according to the biographer, whenever they played out, Gandhi was “master, teacher, husband, and she servant, pupil, wife,” and “indeed a piece of property he owned and could dispose of as he pleased” (92). A scathing indictment of his grandfather’s early years of marriage, these comments bring to the fore the insufferably unequal dynamic between husband and wife through the first two decades of their marriage, if not more. Rajmohan Gandhi also says that Gandhi’s “success” as “lawyer, leader, reformer” had “swollen his pride,” and his grandmother’s “resistance to his moral certitude” had “turned the reformer spirit into a knife” (92). The chronicler’s choice of words enables us to see more closely his subject’s patriarchal recalcitrance in the face of his wife’s exertion of the right to individual choice and agency, and establishes clearly, the shortcomings of Gandhi’s initial experiments with
reform of various kinds. His crusade to change the status quo with regard to caste was initially carried out at tremendous cost to gender reform, a wrong that he would attempt to right later in life, and it bears to be said with some irony, unilaterally. Rajmohan Gandhi reminds us that we “owe our glimpse of this unpleasant face” of the Mahatma “entirely to Gandhi’s own candid recollections,” highlighting his grandfather’s ability to atone for his wrongdoings publicly, making little if any attempt to hide his own fallibility, and using every opportunity to demystify his public persona (92). However, says the biographer, Gandhi’s acknowledgement of a “domineering and pitiless side to his nature,” and his “contrite envisioning” of Kasturba as “‘helpmate, a comrade and a partner in the husband’s joys and sorrows’, rather than one ‘born to do her husband’s behest’” came “many years later,” indicating a long period during which Gandhi trained his mind to consciously change his attitude to encompass the notion of a (perceived) equality between men and women towards the betterment of society (93). He ends by saying that while Gandhi claims to be “‘really ashamed’” at “his behaviour,” at the time that this incident occurred, he “did not seem to comprehend the forces inside him that made him act or react the way he did” (93).

As the only biographer to discuss Gandhi’s deep attraction for Sarladevi Chaudhrani in 1920, among those under scrutiny in this study, it could be argued that Rajmohan Gandhi’s response to his grandfather’s authoritarian behaviour towards his wife in this incident, and his subsequent contrition and guilt with regard to his marriage, was coloured by the former’s awareness and acknowledgement of that relationship, which played out a few years before Gandhi’s autobiography first appeared in serialised format. His documenting of the episode, however, once again excludes a vital understanding of the incident from his grandmother’s perspective; his commentary driven entirely by the source material available to him in the form of his grandfather’s autobiographical prose. Like Fischer, Rajmohan Gandhi writes from the perspective of an educated man raised in the latter half of the twentieth century, with contemporary Western ideas of gender parity informing his perception and critique of his grandparents’ marriage; and to that extent, he certainly does present Kasturba in a sympathetic light, as being at the receiving end of her husband’s fluctuating interests and ideologies. However, like Fischer, once again, he reproduces the incident from the perspective of the Mahatma, and while valorising his grandmother’s ability to stand up to her imperious husband, however briefly, we are left with no answers with regard to how the argument concerning the chamber-pot was eventually resolved, except insofar as Gandhi “[returned] to his senses” and “shut the gate” he had earlier thrown open in order to push out his rebelling wife (92). More interestingly, and disturbingly, Judith Brown, the only woman biographer included in this study, to analyse Gandhi’s life from birth to death, chooses to reduce this episode from her narrative of his life to a few sentences. While we are told, somewhat disparagingly, that “[p]oor [Kasturba]
and her brood submitted to [Gandhi’s] authority” on the matter of their attire and table manners when they first decided to join the patriarch in Durban in 1896, as also in the matter of the children’s education which was managed entirely under Gandhi’s care, there is next to no detail available on what Brown calls “a [fierce] altercation” between husband and wife (Brown 40). Doing away with an essential recounting of the facts of the episode, including the conversation originally attributed to Gandhi and Kasturba, she focuses on the moment when the couple “stood at the entrance to their home, locked in public conflict, as he threatened to push her out” (40).

Brown adds, that “they desisted” from taking the fight any further “in shame,” and that “peace was restored as it always was after their ‘numerous bickerings’” (40). There is no attempt to investigate the nature of Gandhi’s relationship with Kasturba, or her role in his public and personal life, which is particularly striking considering Brown is a woman writer, who attempts to decode Gandhi’s inner life, often resorting to an analysis of his psyche, in a way that most other biographers have not. And yet, in her examination of Gandhi’s mental and emotional world, she creates a monolithic male figure that dominates the biographical canvas, one that accommodates the influence and presence of other characters, and yet never allows them to emerge from the periphery of the narrative to share centre stage with Gandhi. This is particularly true of her representation of Kasturba, who is relegated to a passive player largely in the domestic realm, an arena that does not seem to interest Brown, who focusses more on the protagonist’s political persona. Kasturba, then, is an illiterate and culturally underexposed housewife and mother in Brown’s construction of her, one who follows through with her husband’s diktats, not because she has the ability to sift through his discourse and identify the areas within which they share similar ideals, but because that is what Indian women of her time ostensibly did in the interest of social and material security. While Brown reveals a genuine and scholarly interest in deconstructing Gandhi as a politician and as a human being with foibles and imperfections, there is a palpable condescension reserved for her construction of Kasturba. In truncating what was an incident of vital interest in Gandhi’s personal and political life, Brown pushes Kasturba further into the margins of profoundly Gandhi-centric narrative. The removal of the argument as verbalised in Gandhi’s autobiography, does not allow the reader of Brown’s biography on Gandhi to understand or appreciate Kasturba’s position with regard to Gandhi’s reformist sensibilities. And like the other biographies in this study, she is content to state that “peace was restored” in the marriage even after the bitter falling out, without drawing attention to the nature of the compromise made by one or both parties in the argument, and its impact on the gender dynamic in the Gandhi household in Durban at the end of the nineteenth century. And since Gandhi’s political persona found its most embryonic origins in aspects of his personal life, not examining this enmeshing of the public with the private, for the
purpose of writing a political biography on the man, leaves a huge lacuna in the reader’s understanding of the Mahatma.

In *Gandhi before India*, the newest of the biographies under scrutiny in this study, having been published in 2013, Ramachandra Guha, too, reserves a short paragraph for the narration of the incident concerning the chamber-pot in Beach Grove Villa. Unlike the other biographers examined so far, he chooses to refer to the narrative register of the episode as that of a “disagreement,” which seems rather tepid in the light of the fact that Gandhi almost threw his wife out of the house over the fight (Guha 140). Guha is the only biographer to cite the name of the clerk, Vincent Lawrence, whose chamber-pot was the cause of much friction between the couple. Describing Lawrence’s background, Guha says that the clerk’s family “were regarded as Panchammas, a term, translating as the ‘fifth’ caste, denoting their Untouchable status” (140). He then goes on to say that Kasturba “refused to clean the clerk’s chamber pot,” and thought that her husband “should not pollute himself by doing so,” as a result of which Gandhi “was enraged” (140). While Guha’s representation of the episode focusses on decoding it as a sociological phenomenon, with an emphasis on the element of caste inequity in Hindu society, it does not analyse the corresponding inequity evident in Gandhi’s marriage to Kasturba. The language of the narrative records Kasturba’s unwillingness to clean the chamber-pot, and her belief that her husband would be soiled equally by the act of cleaning it, should he undertake the task, but it does not explicitly address the idea that Gandhi’s cleaning of the pot would be a double burden for her to bear, as an upper-caste Hindu, and equally importantly, as a woman who was consigned to a life of wifely devotion. Guha quotes Gandhi saying “I will not stand this nonsense in my house,” and also how he “dragged [Kasturba] down to the gate” in a fit of “fury” (140). But he makes no mention of the fact that Kasturba did in fact carry the chamber-pot regardless of how offensive she found the chore, in order to please her husband; further, he makes no mention of Gandhi’s desire that she complete the task “cheerfully” which incensed her further (M. K. Gandhi 231). Finally, he does not document the details of the argument that the couple actually had, preferring, instead, to offer Kasturba’s perspective in third person. “[Gandhi’s] wife,” he says, “weeping, asked if he had no shame, to push her out in a foreign country, with no parents or relatives to take her in” presenting her in the light of someone who questions her plight as a woman amidst tears, but also passively endures without fiery and angry outburst.

Arun Gandhi’s biography on his grandmother, by virtue of its ability to penetrate the realm of the domestic as opposed to the public, and its inherent sympathy for Kasturba’s position in her exacting and unconventional marriage to Gandhi, presents, perhaps, the most elaborate and compassionate account of the incident from Kasturba’s perspective. He is also
the only chronicler to view the incident at the outset as a “sharp conflict” between “Kasturba’s loyalty to her husband” and the “traditions in which she had been nurtured” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 86). The biographer grandson says that the incident occurred “early in 1898,” a few months after his grandmother had discovered that she was pregnant with her third child, Ramdas, another vital fact that is addressed neither by the other biographers nor Gandhi in his autobiography. According to Arun Gandhi, the pregnancy was “proving difficult,” as a result of which Kasturba “tired easily, felt uncommonly irritable and yearned to be back home” (86). Nevertheless, he says that his grandmother “tried uncomplainingly to keep her household running smoothly” (86). He then says that “[c]omplying with [Gandhi’s] decree” that all the residents of the Beach Grove Villa must clear their own chamber-pots, and “especially his proviso that she would join him in cleaning any pots that were neglected,” filled Kasturba with “disgust, anger, and above all, shame” (86). From her earliest years, he continues, she “had known, undeniably and as a matter of faith,” that cleaning excreta was “the filthiest of tasks,” which was “fit only for Untouchables,” whom he describes, from her indoctrinated perspective as “those unseen polluting shadows who came and took away the nightsoil from the toilets in the back of the house by the road, without ever setting foot on the family’s property” (86). Arun Gandhi says that Kasturba “deeply resented” the fact that she had been asked by “her own husband” to “defile” herself in this manner, and wondered how one “so respectful of everyone else’s religious conviction” could be so “heedless” of those held by “his own wife” (86). The seemingly common-sensical question very quickly draws the reader’s attention to Gandhi’s co-opting of his wife’s individual beliefs and assertions under the aegis of his unilateral ideology. When a “Christian Indian of Untouchable parentage” inadvertently left his chamber-pot unemptied under his bed one morning, Kasturba reached her “breaking point,” words that express both her mounting frustration, and what must have appeared to her to be the relentless nature of Gandhi’s reformist tyranny (86).

Unlike her husband, who saw inherent virtue in the breaking down of such caste barriers, and would clean the chamber-pot without hesitation, Kasturba, according to Arun Gandhi, felt that “the idea of her husband doing such degrading work was just as bad as doing it herself,” and therefore, “[w]eping and furious” as she was, Kasturba “forced herself” to carry the pot and empty it, “unaware that Mohandas was watching her” (86). This description brings to the fore Kasturba’s ability to clamp down on her disgust and make, what was, to her, a profound sacrifice even at the risk of polluting herself and compromising her caste integrity in order to spare her husband, what she imagined would be the equivalent revulsion and breach of morality, at the prospect of performing the task himself. The biographer then goes on to reproduce verbatim, his grandfather’s narrative of the account from the latter’s autobiography, an important nod to the source material enabling
the reader to arrive at the original text after exploring the context within which the confrontation between husband and wife took place. In his analysis of the passage from Gandhi’s book, Arun Gandhi says that the fact that his grandfather “would remember this incident so vividly, and describe it in such painful and self-accusatory detail” is “significant,” because as he recounted the episode many years after its actual occurrence, it appeared to his grandson, that the patriarch “wished somehow to make amends to the young wife whose needs he so often misunderstood and whose feelings he so often disregarded” (87).

More importantly, he says, Gandhi’s portrayal of his wife, in the passage shows her to be a “passionately full of life,” “forceful and sensible woman,” in contrast to the “enigmatic, withdrawn, unfailingly compliant wife,” who, in his view, “often appears” in other parts of his grandfather’s autobiography, and in biographies written by others on the Mahatma (87). The woman described by Gandhi in the context of this incident, is, to Arun Gandhi’s mind, a “very human Ba,” someone who did not always “have the patience of a saint – or for a saint-in-the making” (87). He also says that the occurrence of “a show of near-violence” in Kasturba’s sixteen years of marriage to Gandhi at the time, had brought about a “subtle change” in their mutual equation (87).

The altercation, in Kasturba’s biographer’s view, brought into “agonising focus” Gandhi’s need to control his temper; and also compelled him to question some of his beliefs with regard to his relationship with Kasturba. “[W]hat if Kasturba was his wife, and sworn to obey him? Did she not have a mind of her own? Was he right to expect her or anyone else to accept what he said without argument?” offers Arun Gandhi as some of the probing ideas that visited his grandfather’s mind in the wake of the episode concerning the chamber-pot. There is no indication in Gandhi’s autobiography that these questions emerged as an immediate result of the incident, although he recollects its occurrence in the spirit of retrospective penitence, probably cultivated over a long period and after repeated lapses with regard to his wife. However, once again, for want of greater clarity in the source of the information on the confrontation, namely Gandhi’s autobiography, Arun Gandhi too, disappointingly, does not explore the nature of the truce at which the couple arrived to end the quarrel, saying only that “[e]ager to forget” the squabble, and in order to “think of the future,” both parties “vowed that it must not—could not—happen again” (88). Without a clear resolution to the fight, it is impossible to gauge the veracity of the biographer’s theory that the incident did in fact propel his grandfather to re-examine his views in the matter of his wife’s individual identity even as it stood counter to his own. That he was ashamed is made explicitly clear in Gandhi’s autobiography, but whether the politics of their mutual relationship as man and wife witnessed significant alterations as a result of the episode have to be left undetermined. However, Arun Gandhi’s contextual and sympathetic representation of his grandmother through the course of the narrative of this incident,
brings readers unequivocally closer to approaching the dynamic of the situation from Kasturba’s perspective, one that has been consistently marginalised and ‘Other-ised’ by most biographers in this study. In placing Gandhi’s politics squarely at the centre of the narrative of the incident, and removing Kasturba to its periphery by reducing her approach to the prospect of cleaning the chamber-pot as driven purely by unenlightened casteism, they mitigate the nature of Gandhi’s inadequacies as a householder, and allow the lacunae in the narrative to persist at tremendous cost to the construction of Gandhi’s wife in the popular imagination.

4.3 RETURNING FAREWELL GIFTS TO THE INDIAN COMMUNITY IN DURBAN BEFORE DEPARTING FOR INDIA (1901)

Another clash on a matter of principles took place between Gandhi and Kasturba in an incident that has been documented in great detail in Gandhi’s autobiography, as also in several other biographies under scrutiny for the purposes of this study. Occurring sometime in 1901, when Gandhi had decided that his work was “no longer in South Africa but in India,” and had decided to return for good, with his family, to the land of his birth, the episode has been captured in his autobiography under the chapter head “Return to India” (M. K. Gandhi 183). The main reason that Gandhi cites in the said chapter for his decision to leave South Africa, was the fear that despite the other aspects of his public service work amidst his fellow Indians in Natal, he feared that his “main business might become merely money-making,” a clear indication of the direction in which his future life philosophy which encompassed both voluntary poverty and Brahmacharya lay (183). Feeling that he would be “of more service in India,” he requested his friends and co-workers in the Natal Indian Congress to “relieve him,” which they did after “very great difficulty,” on the condition that he should return to South Africa, if, “within a year, the community should need me,” and while Gandhi thought it to be a “difficult condition,” he also says that, like Mirabai, who was bound to her Lord (Krishna) by the “cotton-thread of love,” he too recognised that a similar thread that bound him to the Indian community in Natal was “too strong to break,” another indication that his professional commitments and ties to a wider network of people outside his family were growing to the extent that they would soon outweigh anything he considered to be a ‘personal’ commitment (183). His Natal friends, he says, in the same chapter, “bathed me in the nectar of love,” affection towards him pouring out in the form of “[f]arewell meetings” which were “arranged at every place,” during which “costly gifts” were presented to Gandhi (183). The Mahatma adds, retrospectively, that while gifts had been “bestowed on” him when he had returned to India previously in 1896 to bring Kasturba and his boys to Natal for the first time, as this return to India grew more imminent,
“the farewell was overwhelming,” a comment that points to his growing popularity among the Natal Indians and also the substantial political clout he had gained in the interim (183).

Gandhi chooses not to describe the items received as farewell gifts from his grateful friends, clients and co-workers in the Indian community in Natal in vivid detail, merely offering the reader the sense that they included “things in gold and silver,” as also “articles of costly diamond,” but he does specifically mention a “gold necklace worth fifty guineas,” which he admits was meant for his wife, Kasturba (183). The receipt of expensive gifts led to great inner turmoil in the mind of the Mahatma, which he expresses in the form of rhetorical questions and deliberations in the next passage. “What right had I to accept those gifts?” He asks with characteristic forthrightness; and as a corollary, he continues, that having accepted them, “how could I persuade myself that I was serving the community with remuneration?” calling to question the very nature of his commitment to his fellow Indians in a cause that was clearly very close to his heart (183). With an exception of “a few from my clients,” all the gifts he received, says Gandhi, were “purely for my service to the community,” and since his clients “also helped me in my public work,” he could make “no difference” between the two categories of gifts he had received (183). He also refused to make an exception with regard to the gold necklace that had been gifted to Kasturba on the premise that even that had been given “because of my public work” (184). He goes on to say that as a result of his ruminations on the matter, he suffered from a “sleepless night,” as he “walked up and down my room deeply agitated,” although he could “find no solution” (184).

In a telling statement that explains with remarkable simplicity and economy his exploration of what he valued as true in his existence, he says that while it was “difficult” for him to “forego gifts worth hundreds,” it was even more difficult for him “to keep them” in the interest of basic integrity (184). The next three sentences turn the looking glass towards his wife and children, pointing out that they were being “trained” to a “life of service” and to an “understanding that service was its own reward” (184). The “cotton-threads of love” that bound him in a relationship of overwhelming affection towards the larger community, made severe demands on his family life, as a result of which Kasturba and his two older sons, Harilal and Manilal, were unyieldingly coerced into accepting his truths as their own.

The members of his immediate family were, therefore, to be “trained” to comply with, and eventually internalise, the tenets of his nascent ideology in a variety of ways. “I had no costly ornaments in the house,” declares Gandhi in a simple assertion of his authority, regardless of Kasturba’s desires in this matter (184). “We had been fast simplifying our life,” he adds, not mentioning that the key aspects of this simplification had been steered and guided entirely by him, with next to no voluntary contribution from either Kasturba or his sons towards the effort (184). In such a state of self-simplification, he continues, how could they, as a family, “afford to have gold watches” or “wear gold chains and diamond rings?”
Pointing to the fact that he had been regularly “exhorting people” to “conquer the infatuation for jewellery,” he underscores the hypocrisy in keeping the valuable gifts that had now been given to them (184). Whether Kasturba herself exhorted her friends and cohorts to eschew wealth and jewellery, or to forfeit regular income in favour of a higher calling channelled in the form of public work, is not discussed by Gandhi, who goes on to say that he “decided” that he “could not keep these things,” following which he “drafted a letter, creating a trust of them in favour of the [Natal Indian] community and appointing Pars[ee]l Rustomj[ee] and other trustees” (184). The next morning, he says, he held “a consultation” with his wife and children, and “finally got rid of the heavy incubus,” revealing how heavily the gifts weighed on his conscience. With characteristic scrupulousness, Gandhi goes so far as to discuss his strategy when it came to bringing Kasturba over to his approach on the matter. He says that he knew that he “should have some difficulty in persuading my wife,” even as he was sure that he “should have none so far as the children were concerned” (184). To that extent, he decided “to constitute them my attorneys,” a proposal to which they ostensibly “readily agreed” (184). Gandhi quotes his sons as saying that they did not “need” such “costly presents,” that the family “must return them to the community,” and further still, if they were to ever need them, they could “easily purchase them,” in response to which Gandhi claimed to be “delighted,” and asked them to “plead with your mother” for the cause into which they had been newly initiated (184).

It is important to note that Gandhi’s two advocates in this mission were far too young at the time to have been able to stand up to the patriarch’s views in any matter, or to have coherently formed and reasonably independent belief systems outside those inculcated in them by their father. Harilal, born in 1888, was only thirteen years old at the time of this incident, and Manilal, born three years later, who assisted him in the task of convincing their mother, was not quite ten. And yet, in Gandhi’s recollection of the episode, the two boys robustly supported his stance and even spoke on behalf of their mother saying she “does not need to wear the ornaments,” that she would “want to keep them for us,” and since they “don’t want them,” she would agree to part with the gifts without demur (184). Their early mooring in Gandhi’s ideology with regard to simple living was equally reinforced by the patriarchal nature of the customary Hindu household where the men took key decisions regardless of whether the women of the establishment were in concert with their views. It is a critique that Kasturba herself seems to have offered Gandhi when the matter was taken up with her. In Gandhi’s recollection of the incident, Kasturba apparently recognised that her husband did not need the gifts that had been bestowed upon the family, and that even their children believed they did not need them because if “cajoled,” they would “dance to your tune,” a clear indication of her understanding of Gandhi’s hold over their minds (184). Kasturba also said that she understood her husband’s “not
permitting me to wear them,” but “what about my daughters-in-law?” she implored with material foresight, “[t]hey will be sure to need them” (184). “And who knows what will happen tomorrow,” she added with equal prudence, emphatically stating that she would be “the last person to part with gifts so lovingly given” (184). Gandhi’s description of the incident makes it sound like an ideological combat between husband and wife, saying the “torrent of arguments went on,” amply “reinforced, in the end, by tears” from Kasturba; however, he continues, the children were “adamant,” while he remained “unmoved” revealing the use of gendered battle strategy in the form of feminine tears which needed to be countered by masculine resolution and strength of purpose (185).

Standing his ground, Gandhi recalls having said that the children “have yet to get married,” and pointed out that the couple did not want to see their sons “married young;” more importantly, he added that when they were grown up, they could “take care of themselves” (185). Asserting his patriarchal authority to arrange matches for their children he emphasised that they would not have “for our sons, brides who are fond of ornaments,” and if perchance they did need to provide for such ornaments, “I am there,” he argued unequivocally, and Kasturba could ask him for them then (185). In a spirited rejoinder, presented in words from Gandhi’s memory of the incident, Kasturba is supposed to have said, “[a]sk you? I know you by this time,” words that express her knowledge of and frustration with Gandhi’s ways (185). “You deprived me of my ornaments, you would not leave me in peace with them;” she continues, “[f]ancy you offering to get ornaments for the daughters-in-law!” (185). Accusing her husband of trying to make sadhus of my boys from today,” she stresses that the ornaments “will not be returned” (185). Taking a stab at establishing an identity separate from that of her domineering husband, she asks, “[a]nd pray what right have you to my necklace?” attempting to stress her right over gifts given to her as opposed to those given to Gandhi (185). When the patriarch, however, offered a churlish rejoinder, saying “is the necklace given you for your service or for my service?” his wife retaliated saying that service rendered by Gandhi was as good as service rendered by her (185). Gandhi’s representation of Kasturba in this incident portrays her as spirited, individualistic, assertive and articulate. To his credit, he does not attempt to subdue her end of the argument, and even goes so far as to present her in a sympathetic light, quoting her as saying “I have toiled and moiled for you day and night. Is that no service? You forced all and sundry on me, making me weep bitter tears, and I slaved for them!” which Gandhi calls “pointed thrusts;” some of which, he admits, “went home” (185). With equally stringent honesty he says he was “determined to return the ornaments,” and “somehow succeeded in extorting a consent from her” (185). Retrospective contrition for his attitude towards Kasturba in his autobiography is offset by his determination to abide by what he sees as a fundamental underpinning of his existence.
To that extent, he says that the gifts he received in 1896 upon his first departure from Durban and in then in 1901 “were all returned,” following which a “trust-deed was prepared” in which the gifts and ornaments were deposited “to be used for the service of the community,” according to Gandhi’s wishes or “those of the trustees” (185). He adds that the fund was “still there” at the time of writing his autobiography, “being operated upon in times of need” (185). At the end of the chapter, he declares that he has “never regretted the step,” and with the passing of the years, Kasturba “has also seen its wisdom,” upholding a principle that has “saved us from many temptations,” yet again appropriating his wife’s voice and identity as he subsumes her views under his own. As a closing argument he offers that he is “definitely of the opinion that a public worker should accept no costly gifts,” and by extension, no one who belongs to his immediate kith and kin should be the recipient of such munificence either (185). Louis Fischer’s representation of the account is vastly altered from that presented by Gandhi in style and tone, and more importantly, it is presented from the perspective and consciousness of the Mahatma, very strongly making him the ‘Self’ to which Kasturba must play the ‘Other.’ In Fischer’s narrative, on the eve of Gandhi’s impending departure with his family from Durban in 1901, the Indian community “outdid itself in concrete demonstrations of gratitude” to the lawyer, who was presented with “numerous gold and silver objects and diamond ornaments,” in addition to which there was a “very valuable gold necklace” exclusively for Kasturba (Fischer 83). Fischer’s use of the word “gratitude” brings home very quickly the nature of Gandhi’s participation and steering of the political activities of the Natal Indians, and their reciprocal affection and recognition and indebtedness for the services he had rendered them as a community (83). He also says that when Gandhi had first returned to India in 1896, he had received “small, personal tokens of appreciation” which he had then “accepted easily in that spirit” (83). What Fischer leaves undiscussed is the change in Gandhi’s stature amongst the men and women of the Indian community whom he had grown to represent in their fight against the British government in Natal in the five years since his last trip to India.

What he does focus on is how Gandhi’s “view of personal possessions had been gradually changing” and how he was “beginning to see danger in wealth and property” (83). According to Fischer, Gandhi, who had been “pleading with people” to “conquer their infatuation for jewellery,” now “himself owned more than anybody whom he had tried to convert,” pointing to a dissonance that gave him “a sleepless night” (83). Since the gifts might be “construed as payment for services” which he had rendered “with no thought of material gain,” he “wanted to give them up” (83). Fischer’s account portrays the subject of his biography as having been torn between the “yearning for financial security” and the “desire for freedom derived from owning nothing” as he “paced up and down for hours arguing with himself” (83). However, despite the fact that he ran the risk of fuelling a
family crisis” if he returned the gifts, and also his knowledge that Kasturba would protest against the decision, “by morning,” in Fischer’s words, Gandhi’s “mind was made up: the gifts must go” (83). However, in order to “make the renunciation a fact beyond family dispute,” he first drafted a letter which “elaborated a plan” of using the gifts to “create a community fund,” following which he “proceeded to recruit” Harilal and Manilal who were “readily persuaded” to participate in his plan to convince their mother of the virtue of giving up the gifts since they had “no objection” to their father’s “emerging new philosophy of austerity,” besides which, says Gandhi’s biographer, “Papa was a compelling debater,” deftly introducing an element of hero worship that the children felt towards Gandhi (83-84). Therefore, when the artful lawyer asked them to “plead with your mother,” they agreed with “alacrity,” saying she “does not need ornaments,” and that she would want them “for us,” and so “if we don’t want them why should she not part with them?” (84). This element of Fischer’s narrative bears the closest resemblance to Gandhi’s original recollection in his autobiography, but Kasturba’s response to her husband and children’s argument is phrased differently, bringing to light, the subjective nature of storytelling and character-construction. Stating that her rebuttal “started calmly,” Fischer quotes her as saying to Gandhi that it was “all very well” for him since he didn’t “care for jewels” and did not wear them (84). It was also “easy enough” for him to “influence the boys” since they always dance to their father’s tune (84). “As for me,” she continued in Fischer’s version, “I have already obeyed your order not to wear trinkets,” considering that after all the “talking” her husband had done about “other people not wearing jewels,” it would not do for her to wear them either” (84). Her “bitterness and growing determination,” however, was foregrounded when she said, “what about my daughters-in-law?” emphasising that “[t]hey will be sure to want them” (84). Kasturba’s growing stridence was countered by Gandhi, who responded “mildly” with words taken more conspicuously from his autobiography, about how the children were not “married yet,” and how they would take care of themselves when the time came, and most importantly, how brides would be chosen for the boys to fall in line with the family principles (84). Fischer fleshes out the conversation by quoting Kasturba as having said that “[y]oung things like pretty things” on behalf of her future daughters-in-law, to which Gandhi, in an attempt to “soothe” his ruffled wife, responded saying that if they did indeed want ornaments, “I shall be here” and that his wife could ask him when the time eventually came, an answer that “infuriated” Kasturba who said she knew him all too well by this time (84). “You took my jewellery away from me,” she said accusatorily, [i]magine you trying to get jewels for my daughters-in-law!” (84). In Fischer’s account she censures Gandhi for attempting to make “monks” of her boys, a rough English equivalent of the Hindi “sadhu” that Gandhi quotes her as having used in his autobiography; most likely in a bid to make her
argument more accessible to a Western audience (84). “No!” she is said to have “shouted,” to make her point even more unequivocally, “the ornaments will not be returned” (84). While, in the American biographer’s view, the “Hindu wife,” as he referred to Kasturba, was “defiant,” in her staking a claim over the gold necklace, saying that her husband had “no right to return that,” she was beating a “retreat,” having “given up hope of their keeping all the jewels,” an idea that we do not see represented in the original recollection of the incident in Gandhi’s autobiography, and a product, clearly, of Fischer’s interpretation of the dynamic between the couple (85). The chronicler also says that though Gandhi was “eager to mollify” his wife in this matter, his stance was “nevertheless hard,” when he asked “rhetorically” for whose service the necklace had been given as a present to her, a question that only served to incense Kasturba further (85).

Here, Fischer largely retains Gandhi’s narration of Kasturba’s outburst, adding only that she “sobbed” as she argued that service rendered by her husband was as though rendered by her (85). Analysing Gandhi’s response to Kasturba’s diatribe, Fischer says that the patriarch knew that it was a “just reproach,” even though he “did not admit it at the moment,” remaining “determined to return the jewels and create the community fund” (85). Fischer adds that Gandhi was beginning to believe that he should own “nothing costly, whether given or earned,” describing it as a “powerful impulse” which would eventually reach “full flower” and “alter his entire mode of life,” against which, Fischer believes, Kasturba “had no argument” (85). The biographer then proceeds to present an unjustly dichotomous distinction between Kasturba’s desires and those of Gandhi, clearly privileging the latter over the former (85). Kasturba’s, he says, with not a little condescension, was the “instinctive million-year-old female desire for adornment” compounded by the “fear, equally primitive, of material want,” but her “plea for acquisitiveness” could not hold up against Gandhi’s “penchant for renunciation,” nor could she “induce him” to prefer “self-enrichment” to “community service” (85). While Fischer acknowledges that Gandhi “simply asserted his male authority” to ensure that the gifts he received both in 1901 and 1896 would be “surrendered to trustees,” his creation of the unflatteringly binary aspirations for husband and wife presents Gandhi’s values in a noble light, even as those ostensibly espoused by Kasturba are reduced to a shallow analysis which views them as propelled by primitive fear of deprivation, and bolstered by a “female desire for adornment” and “self-enrichment” (85). Fischer recognises, in good measure, that Kasturba, as the woman in an unconventional, albeit deeply patriarchal, household was subject to the changing values of her husband, but in the final tally, also notes that the fund created from Gandhi’s donation of the gifts given to his family “served South Africans Indians for decades later” (85). No such charity is extended towards Kasturba, whose desire to retain the gifts could be viewed, arguably, as stemming from inherent pragmatism, and the need to secure the material
future of a family helmed by a patriarch who was increasingly disinclined to provide for his immediate relations owing to his refusal to treat them in any manner that suggested exclusive mutuality. As a woman represented and constructed by male writers, her perspective remains muted with respect to this incident, even as Gandhi’s nascent ideology find valorisation.

Rajmohan Gandhi discusses the incident involving the return of the gifts taking a more sympathetic view towards his grandmother’s position. Listing the gifts the family received through “the series of farewell events,” he includes a “gold necklace for Kastur, other gold chains, gold watches” and “diamond rings” (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 96). While “[m]ost were from the Indian community, “some” were from clients, says the biographer, detailing how Gandhi spent a “sleepless night” pacing about his room and “debating the gifts” (96). Speaking from his grandfather’s consciousness, Rajmohan Gandhi asks the questions that ostensibly ran through the patriarch’s head: “[s]hould a public servant accept gifts? Since his clients were also helpers in public work, should he even take what they had given?” (96). The biographer points out the frankness with which Gandhi admits to not wanting to “forego gifts worth hundreds” in the latter’s autobiography, even as he recognises that his grandfather found it “more difficult to keep the gifts,” as he drafted a letter “placing the presents in a trust for the community” (96). Rajmohan Gandhi views the Mahatma’s act of “renunciation” as a step “both ethical and political,” which was capable of “adding to his influence whether in South Africa or India,” making a shrewd assessment of his grandfather’s statesmanship, even as he commends the latter’s integrity (96). He also notes that Gandhi held his “consultation” with Kasturba on the matter only after “unfairly” securing support from Harilal, Manilal, and his sister’s son, Gokuldas, who lived with the family in Durban at the time (96). The three boys decided, in the biographer’s words, that they “did not need the presents,” besides agreeing to “persuade their mother” (96). This however, he says, “did not prove easy,” since Kasturba “fought with passion and logic both,” and while she told Gandhi that “the boys might dance to his tune,” she was concerned about her daughters-in-law, and since the future “was unknown,” she would be “the last person to part with gifts so lovingly given” (97). Unlike Fischer, who makes pointedly negative remarks about Kasturba’s desire for wealth and adornment, Rajmohan Gandhi presents his grandmother’s voice as a pragmatic counter to her husband’s excessively idealistic stance. While he largely paraphrases Kasturba’s words, the biographer sees the merit of her argument. Gandhi and his sons “would not budge,” says Rajmohan Gandhi, who also summarises Gandhi’s response to Kasturba’s question regarding their future daughters-in-law, saying that when their sons did indeed marry, their wives would be “free from the lure of ornaments,” and if, however, ornaments were needed, “Kastur could ask him” (97).
Kasturba’s answering invective, too, is presented in its entirety, enabling the reader to experience her frustration first-hand. He also says that his grandmother asked a “proper legal question” when she demanded to know what right her husband had to the necklace given to her as a gift, and qualifies Gandhi’s response about the necklace as having been received for services rendered by him, as a “pitiless legal reply,” compelling readers and researchers alike to recognise the inequity of the domestic situation (97). Kasturba’s poignant closing argument about having “toiled and moiled” for Gandhi “day and night” is also presented in its entirety from Gandhi’s autobiography, which Rajmohan Gandhi acknowledges as “the sole source for this discussion and our knowledge of it” (97). He also says that while Gandhi believed that “as the years went by,” Kasturba saw “the wisdom of the step,” it is important to note that the “consultation’ over the presents” in 1901, was “not between equals,” presenting yet again, the need to reassess the incident from the perspective of the wife, who was recognisably upset by her husband’s propensity towards extreme self-abnegation, and with good reason (97). Judith Brown, as with the incident examined earlier in the chapter, offers a woefully truncated synopsis of the episode involving the returning of the gifts before the departure of the Gandhi family from South Africa to India in 1901. Allocating merely half a paragraph to the incident in Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope, Brown begins by saying that Kasturba’s relations with her husband were “not unmarked by turmoil” as the latter “launched out on a spiritual journey” which had a “profound impact” on his family, impinging on areas that were “hallowed by religion and social convention” (Brown 40). Taking a more compassionate view of Kasturba’s position with regard to the incident, she briskly describes how the matriarch “let loose a torrent of arguments” when Gandhi “insisted” on returning the “parting gifts,” saying that “he might not need these things, but what might befall the family in the future and might not her daughters-in-law eventually need them?” (40). Brown says that Kasturba also “complained” that she had “slaved for Gandhi and accepted his wishes,” and that he had “deprived her of her ornaments and was now trying to make ascetics of her sons” (40). Finally, she adds, “despite the arguments and tears,” Kasturba “acquiesced,” to her husband’s wishes, even though Gandhi later “admitted” that he had “extorted a consent from her” (40).

Brown’s attitude towards Kasturba, though sympathetic, continues to remain problematic, for the simple reason that she views Kasturba’s woes as secondary to the larger canvas of social and political ferment and transformation within which the Mahatma operated. The use of verbs like “complained” to express Kasturba’s vexation and anxiety concerning the ways of her husband also threaten to diminish the strength and significance of her stance in the matter. In abbreviating the documentation of such domestic incidents, despite their presence in Gandhi’s own autobiography, she assigns them secondary, if not tertiary, status, thereby continually reducing and undermining the validity of Kasturba’s presence in shaping
Gandhi’s worldview and life. Further, in retelling the incident entirely in third person, she also robs the incident of its urgency, as also Kasturba of a legitimate first-person voice in Gandhi’s narrative keeping her squarely in the margins even as he occupies centre stage throughout. Ramachandra Guha’s chronicle of Gandhi’s years in South Africa takes a somewhat different route, choosing to focus first on the details of the various farewell events that were organised to commemorate Gandhi’s contribution to the Natal Indian community, before he left with his family for India in 1901. Mining the Sabarmati Ashram Archives in Ahmedabad for more exhaustive information on Gandhi’s early days, he describes a farewell party thrown in Gandhi’s honour on October 12, by his friend and colleague, Parsee Rustomjee as “the grandest ever attempted or achieved by any Indian” with “tapestry on the walls, electric lights specially installed, a profusion of flowers and a band of musicians,” even quoting a journalist as having mentioned the food served as “the most delicate preparations of an Eastern culinary department,” a concrete indication of Gandhi’s elevated stature among his fellow Indians in Durban, as also his connections with wealthy and influential members of the community (Guha 143). During the course of the evening, cites Guha from the Sabarmati Ashram Archives, Rustomjee garlanded Gandhi with a “thick gold chain” and presented him with a “valuable gold locket” and a “large gold medal suitably inscribed,” following which his children were also given “gold medals” (143). Gandhi was also given, he adds, a “bouquet of white roses,” and was garlanded “amid deafening cheers” (143). The next week, another farewell party hosted by the Natal Indian Congress in Grey Street, where the Gandhis were chief guests, was again “a gay occasion, with the staircase festooned with garlands and Chinese lanterns everywhere” (143).

After fulsome tributes in the form of speeches by his friends and co-workers, Abdul Cadir and F. A. Laughton, Gandhi was gifted “an array of jewels,” which included “a diamond ring presented on behalf of the community,” along with “a gold necklace subscribed for by Gujarati Hindus,” and “a diamond pin from Abdul Cadir,” and finally, “a gold watch offered by Dada Abdulla and Company” (143). Guha says that though Gandhi accepted “the presents” and “the compliments” on the evening of the farewell party, he wrote to Parsee Rustomjee “three days later” saying he wished to return the gifts and “make them over” to the Natal Indian Congress, to form “an emergency fund for times of crisis” (143). Unlike Gandhi’s other biographers, who choose to use Gandhi’s autobiography as a source to understand the inner workings of the Mahatma’s mind when this incident occurred, Guha approaches it from the outside, unwilling to speculate, like the others, on the motivations that prompted Gandhi’s decision to return the expensive gifts to the community. He does describe the “terrific row” that was caused in “the Gandhi household” by the patriarch’s resolution in the matter, beginning with Kasturba’s monologue as quoted in Gandhi’s autobiography, about how despite the fact that she understands that her husband does not
wish for her to wear jewellery, she has to think of the future, and on behalf of her son’s wives (143-4). Guha truncates Gandhi’s end of the argument, saying only that the patriarch answered Kasturba by saying it was “not for her to decide what to do with the gifts presented to him” (144). More importantly, he returns to present Kasturba’s “telling rebuke” about the nature of her service to him and therefore the larger community in first person, an important device in establishing the biographer’s sympathy towards her condition amidst a relentlessly oppressive domestic situation, and the need to foreground her voice as against Gandhi’s in his retelling of the incident (144). Guha says that Kasturba’s “opposition,” a far more nuanced attempt at expressing the legitimacy of her argument, was “neutralised” by the “support of his two elder sons,” Harilal and Manilal, who “agreed” that the presents “must be returned” (144). He adds that even as Rustomjee “begged Gandhi to reconsider his decision,” saying that they conveyed “the community’s love” for someone it perceived as its “great and honoured” leader, and that returning them “would lead to the ‘misconstruction of motives in the donor as in the recipient,’” Gandhi remained “unyielding”, and the gifts were, perforce, sent back to the Congress, while the lawyer “prepared to set sail for his homeland” (144).

Arun Gandhi’s reconstruction of the incident in his biography on Kasturba is decidedly more dramatic, and also veers on a different path in terms of narrative style and the details involved from Gandhi’s original in his autobiography. It says that when Mohandas “made the decision that they all needed to go home” in 1901, there began “a round of testimonials, farewell parties, and finally, a showering of expensive parting gifts from grateful members of the Indian community,” which he estimates was “altogether about 1000 pounds’ worth of silver, gold and diamond [jewellery], including a gold necklace presented to Kasturba” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 95). “Suddenly,” however, says the biographer grandson, Mohandas and Kasturba “found themselves involved” in what he calls, “a clash of principles” over the gifts received (95). At home, he says, after the farewell event, with presents “lying heaped on a table downstairs,” Mohandas “paced the floor of his room most of the night, unable to sleep” (95). On the one hand, says the writer, he could not refuse to “accept the gifts for fear of offending his friends,” while on the other, he could not “keep them with a clear conscience” owing to his long-held belief that “accepting gifts in return for public service was morally wrong” (95). Further, says Arun Gandhi, Mohandas could not see himself, his sons or his wife ever having “any use for expensive [jewellery]” since “[s]implicity had become their way of life” (95). After “[mulling] over the issue for hours,” Gandhi, says his grandson, “finally decided” that, because the gifts were “a tribute to Congress principles,” they should be given to the Natal Indian Congress, to be used “for the benefit of the Indians in South Africa” (95). And to that extent, he "wrote up legal papers" creating a "public trust for the purpose" and named Parsee Rustomjee and "several other close associates" as
trustees (95). Unlike the other biographers, and Gandhi himself, Arun Gandhi is gentler in his description of the Mahatma's ploy towards utilising the consent of his children in his attempt to persuade his wife of his plan. In his account, Arun Gandhi says that the following morning, "reflecting on how to convince Kasturba that he was doing the right thing," Mohandas decided to "take Harilal and Manilal into his confidence," and "got his sons to agree to help him explain to their mother why they could not keep the gifts" without "much difficulty" (95).

Kasturba's biographer further adds that the patriarch was "pleased" when his oldest son, Harilal, "volunteered the suggestion that, if they ever needed jewels, they could buy their own" (95). Gandhi's autobiography does not explicitly point to Harilal with regard to this suggestion, and assuming that is the primary source using which this event has been reconstructed; Arun Gandhi's narrative becomes somewhat circumspect. That he does not cite alternate sources, either oral or written, makes his account even more problematic. Gandhi, he says, was satisfied to hear the ostensible suggestion from his son, because it implied that his lessons "on self-reliance had taken hold" (95). He adds that "[w]ith the boys in tow," Mohandas went to Kasturba and "announced the gifts must be returned" (95). Arun Gandhi says that while Mohandas "anticipated objections," he had "badly underestimated" the "force of his wife's convictions" (96). Kasturba, explains her grandson, was "a traditionalist at heart," one who held that if friends "gave gifts out of love," such gifts should be "accepted in the same spirit" (96). More importantly, he adds, she "was practical," and recognised that the gifts received "added to the family security" (96). She was concerned, he says, for the "future welfare of her own four sons" and "for Mohandas's sister's son, too" (96). When the boys grew up, they might "require help to establish themselves in careers" just as their father had, and speculating further on behalf of his grandmother, the biographer adds that Kasturba felt that "[s]he herself might someday need something to fall back upon" (96). While he attempts to present the narrative from Kasturba's perspective and offers rational arguments on behalf of her stance, in this case, the lack of sources in establishing her views on the matter more concretely, leaves the reader at the mercy of the author's conjectural discourse. In the process, his inherent sympathy for his grandmother is pushed to the periphery by the lack of substantive evidence that could effectively define her position as a wife and woman with regard to the gifts given to the family. Saying that despite having to face "the solid phalanx of family males," Kasturba stood her ground, "firmly" stating that she did not agree with her husband, and that gifts given "with such affection" could not be "rejected" thus (96). Gandhi, in this version of the narrative, said in response that "it is immoral to accept gifts given for social service," to which Kasturba said she wished to retain them for her daughters-in-law (96).
Arun Gandhi is quick to point out that Kasturba's was a "reasonable position," since in an Indian wedding, he offers by way of explanation presumably to an international audience, "the bridegroom's parents are required to make a gift of jewels to the bride" (96). In "exasperation," Mohandas said, in turn, that "the boys are still young, they won't marry for a long time yet," to which the children apparently "chimed in" saying, "[w]e don't need these things" (96). In Arun Gandhi's retelling of the incident, Kasturba "snapped" at the youngsters, saying "[w]ho asked you?" before she accused her husband of making "saints out of my boys before they are men" (96). The remainder of the argument plays out largely in consonance with its original representation in Gandhi's autobiography, with the odd exception of subjective descriptions, such as a reference to Kasturba's voice, which her grandson says was "usually melodious," but turned "strident" when confronting her husband's belief that he could and would arrange for jewels for their daughters-in-law in the distant future when the need arose (96). Arun Gandhi says that his grandfather "never regretted his decision" and "according to his autobiography" his grandmother "eventually saw its wisdom," but he points out pertinently that as a result of the incident, Kasturba also learnt "what became increasingly true," namely that "in a battle of wills over what he considered a matter of principle, Bapu was not to be bested" (97). Unlike the previous incident concerning the cleaning of the chamber pot, this episode has a clear resolution; one that underlines in very clear ways, Gandhi's patriarchal dominance within the domestic set up, his ideals prevailing to the exclusion of those of every other member of his immediate family. While there are no glaring inconsistencies in the way Kasturba has been represented/ constructed by subsequent biographers, drawing as they do entirely from Gandhi's autobiography, there are definitely smaller nuanced criticisms levelled at Gandhi by each of them, as they try to examine Kasturba’s place and station through the unfurling of the incident through their individual retellings of the incident. Interestingly, and dishearteningly, it is the only woman biographer among those under scrutiny who fails to assign adequate importance to the episode, or to attribute more courage and practicality to Kasturba’s desire to retain the gifts. Judith Brown and Louis Fischer, also, by virtue of their cultural differences from the context which they seek to explore and examine, offer the least insightful and sensitive representations of Kasturba in the matter of this confrontation between husband and wife.

4.4 PERSUADING GANDHI TO DRINK GOAT’S MILK (1918)

The incident we will now discuss at some length, concerning how Kasturba prevailed upon Gandhi to begin consuming goat’s milk, even though he had sworn never to touch milk for the rest of his life, is dealt with in the Chapter “The Rowlatt Bills and My Dilemma” in
Gandhi’s autobiography. However, its antecedents, which are important in establishing the events that led up to the moment where Gandhi yielded to Kasturba’s persuasion, are available in the previous chapter titled “Near Death’s Door,” which must be briefly perused, before we come to a close reading of the actual incident. In 1918, at the end of his gruelling campaign to recruit soldiers to join the British army for the First World War, in Kheda district, Gandhi’s hectic schedule compounded by his stringent diet comprising principally of “groundnut butter and lemons” gave him what he calls “a slight attack of dysentery” (M. K. Gandhi 374). He returned to Sabarmati Ashram the same evening, to discover that owing to “some festival,” despite his decision to have “nothing for my midday meal,” Kasturba “tempted” him and he “succumbed” (375). As he was under a vow to take “no milk or milk products,” his wife had “specially prepared” a “sweet of wheaten porridge with oil added to it instead of ghi,” for him, in addition to which she fed him a “bowlful of mung,” and since he was “fond of these things,” he “readily took them” in the hope that “without coming to grief” he should “eat just enough to please Kasturbai” and “satisfy my palate” (375). However, greed took over and instead of eating “very little,” he had “my fill of the meal,” which according to him was “sufficient invitation to the angel of death,” and within an hour, says the autobiography, the dysentery “appeared in acute form” (375). Gandhi insisted on continuing his plans of going to Nadiad that evening despite his illness, and upon reaching the Hindu Anathashram, which served as their headquarters amidst “gripping pain,” he was compelled to use a makeshift commode which was brought into his room for his use, suffering, by his account, “thirty or forty motions in twenty-four hours” (375). Further, as “penalty for my folly,” Gandhi refused all medical aid, as his colleagues and well-wishers watched him suffer in “helpless dismay” (375). Having lost his appetite completely, he felt his body had become a “lump of clay;” his motions left him “completely exhausted,” and that brought on “delirious fever” causing his colleagues great alarm (376).

Gandhi’s friend and patron, Ambalal Sarabhai, and his wife, came to Nadiad and took him to their Mirzapur bungalow in Ahmedabad, where a “low fever persisted,” which “[wore] away my body from day to day,” leaving Gandhi to believe that the illness was bound to be “prolonged and possibly fatal,” and so he requested to be brought back to the Sabarmati Ashram (376). There he attempted hydropathy which “gave some relief,” even though it was “a hard job to build up the body,” and while medical advisers “overwhelmed me with advice,” he continued to refuse to take anything (376). Around this time, some even tried to convince him to take “meat broth” as a “way out of the milk vow” and yet another well-wisher “strongly recommended eggs,” but Gandhi writes that for him the question of diet was “not one to be determined on the authority of the Shastras” but one that was “interwoven with my course of life” which was guided by “principles no longer depending upon outside authority” (376). He also adds emphatically that he had no desire “to live at
the cost” of his principles, especially when he had “enforced it relentlessly in respect of my wife, children and friends” (376). The title of the chapter borrows from a night during this illness when Gandhi “gave [himself] up to despair” and fearing that he was “at death’s door,” sent for the doctor who informed him that he was suffering from a “nervous breakdown due to extreme weakness” (377). Since he could not get rid of the feeling that the “end was near,” he began “devoting all my waking hours” to “listening to the Gita being read to me by all the inmates of the Ashram,” living in what he describes as a “helpless state,” as he received “the services of friends and co-workers,” and watched “the body slowly wearing away” (377). It was then that he was visited by “a strange creature” from Maharashtra, who Gandhi decided was “a crank like myself,” and went by the name Sjt. Kelkar (377). Affiliated with the Brahmo Samaj, the “Ice Doctor,” as the members of the ashram began to refer to him, conducted experiments on Gandhi’s body, which the latter permitted because he did not mind “external treatment,” which consisted of the “application of ice all over the body” (377). While Gandhi’s autobiography refuses to offer his endorsement to the treatment, he says that it “certainly infused in me a new hope and a new energy” which improved his appetite and even enabled him to go on short walks (377).

Kelkar also advised Gandhi to consume “raw eggs” saying they would improve his health, and were as “harmless as milk” and did not fall under “any category of meat,” which the Mahatma steadfastly refused, even as the slow recovery managed to renew in him an “interest in public activities” (378). It is here that we come to the chapter, namely, “The Rowlatt Bills and My Dilemma,” which takes up where the previous chapter ends, and which we will examine more closely for the purposes of our study. The chapter begins with Gandhi going to Matheran, because “[f]riends and doctors assured” him that he would “recuperate faster” if he went there; however, the water in the hill station being “very hard,” it made Gandhi’s stay there “extremely difficult” (378). The attack of dysentery had rendered his anal tract “extremely tender,” which led to “fissures” that caused “excruciating pain” at the time of evacuation; as a result, the very thought of eating “filled [Gandhi] with dread” and he was compelled to leave Matheran within a week (378). Dr. Dalal, a physician, whose ability to take quick decisions “captured” Gandhi, said that he would not be able “rebuild your body” unless “you take milk,” and if, in addition, the patient was amenable to taking “iron and arsenic injections,” the doctor could guarantee “fully to renovate your constitution” (378). Gandhi’s autobiography says that he replied to the doctor’s suggestions saying, “”[y]ou can give me the injections,” but “milk is a different question; I have a vow against it” (378). When the doctor enquired about “the nature” of his vow, Gandhi purportedly told him “the whole history and the reasons” behind his decision not to consume milk, especially since he had come to know that “the cow and the buffalo were subjected to the process of phooka,” which had left him feeling “a strong disgust” for milk;
compounded also by his long held belief that milk was not “the natural diet of man,” as a result of which he “abjured its use altogether” (378). Kasturba, says Gandhi, “was standing near my bed listening all the time to this conversation,” at the end of which, she “interposed” saying, “[b]ut surely you cannot have any objection to goat’s milk then,” a simple suggestion to which the doctor too held, saying to Gandhi, “[i]f you will take goat’s milk, it will be enough for me” (378). The Mahatma says, succinctly, that he “succumbed” to the proposal (378).

Gandhi states that it was his “intense eagerness to take up the Satyagraha fight” which created in him, a “strong desire to live,” and consequently, he “contended myself with adhering to the letter of my vow only,” and, in the process, adds, rather punitively, “sacrificed its spirit” (378-9). He explains his harsh critique of his actions by saying that while he originally had “only the milk of the cow and the she-buffalo in mind” when he took the vow against milk consumption, by “natural implication,” the pledge covered the milk of “all animals,” and further, so long as he held that milk was not the natural diet of man, he believed it was not right “for me to use milk at all” (379). And yet, “knowing all this,” he says he agreed to take goat’s milk because “[t]he will to live proved stronger than the devotion to truth,” adding with more self-directed bitterness and mortification, that in this instance, “the votary of truth compromised his sacred ideal” in his “eagerness” to take up the fight for Satyagraha (379). His rancour and guilt come to the fore several years later in his recounting of the episode in his autobiography, where he says that the “memory of this action even now rankles in my breast” and fills him with “remorse” even as he is “constantly thinking of how to give up goat’s milk;” but, he admits with characteristic honesty that he “cannot yet free myself from that subtlest of temptations,” that is “the desire to serve” which “still holds me” (379). The “ideal of truth,” he says a little later in the chapter, “requires that vows taken should be fulfilled in the spirit as well as in the letter,” repeating once again that what “galls” him, is that he “killed the spirit” or the “soul of my vow” by adhering to “its outer form only” (379). However, Gandhi adds that as a result of his taking goat’s milk, Dr. Dalal was able to perform “a successful operation for fissures” on him; and as he “recuperated,” his “desire to live” also “revived,” especially because “God had kept work in store for me” (379). Gandhi’s account of his illness and recovery makes next to no mention of Kasturba, who was instrumental in his agreeing to consider, if not consume, goat’s milk. The focus of his narrative is on the didactic and philosophical need to discuss the nature of vows and how they must be observed, as also an exacting confession of personal behaviour to the contrary.

The reason this particular reading of the incident brings in details from two chapters is because it attempts to explore the protracted and acute nature of Gandhi’s illness, as also
his extreme positions with regard to his health, driven entirely by principles he held dearer to his conscience than his family even. His steadfast refusal to get medical aid even when his life hung precariously in the balance, and his retrospective remorse and shame at the prospect of having broken a vow, are great indicators of the punishing standards to which he held himself and those around him at all times; and more importantly, the sheer magnitude of his wife’s accomplishment under the circumstances. In her limited presence, Kasturba, by the Mahatma’s own admission, intervened at a crucial time and compelled him to explore a loophole in the text of his vow, coaxing him to bend, if not entirely break, his fairly rigidly guarded rules for the betterment of his health. Gandhi’s grave illness and slow recovery are documented with economy in Millie Polak’s memoir on him, titled Mr. Gandhi: The Man, where she describes his life as seemingly “running out” for a spell owing to what she calls “intestinal trouble” during her stay in India in 1918 (Polak 141). Two doctors, she says in her recollection, “were in constant attendance” upon Gandhi, and were “at their wits’ end” with regard to what to feed him (141). According to Polak, they believed milk to be “the only thing to keep him going,” but since Gandhi had taken a vow to abjure milk, “neither the arguments of the doctors nor the absolute pleading on her knees of Mrs. Gandhi” would make the patriarch change his mind in the matter (141). While Millie Polak was not in the immediate vicinity of the Mahatma during his illness, she says she was kept “constantly advised” of his condition, adding that at one point his condition was so serious he believed he was dying and wished to send her a “word of affection,” which he did through “a little note of farewell” (142). She in turn wrote back to him saying his “work for India was not finished” and that it was “not ‘goodbye’” (142). Gandhi, says Polak, recovered “under conditions” of which he told her “much later” (142). In her version, he was “content to leave the fleshly body that worried and hampered him so,” adding that if milk was “the only thing” to save his body, he “refused to break his vow” and consume it (142).

In Polak’s account, which was recalled to her by Gandhi himself, he said “[i]t was Ba (Mrs. Gandhi) who discovered a way” by saying to him, “[y]our vow was taken against the milk of the cow, but it was not taken against the milk of the goat, so you can take goat’s milk and still keep your vow” (142). Kasturba’s suggested remedy, says Polak, proved to be “a great success,” and Gandhi “gradually became himself again” (142). The memoirist quotes Gandhi as saying “[y]ou women are very persistent and clever” with a “twinkle in his eye” and an “intonation in his voice” to suggest that he “almost admired” Kasturba for making the “subtle distinction” which enabled her to “restore him to health” (142). While Gandhi’s first hand recollection of the incident in his autobiography offers no commendation to Kasturba for her participation in precipitating his cure, Mille Polak says, in no uncertain terms, that he did indeed credit his wife for his eventual recovery. Polak’s account also suggests, through the “twinkle” in Gandhi’s eye, that despite his self-flagellation over having rendered a
hallowed vow hollow, he seemed to have been happy to be alive and physically well. In the chapter “Goat’s Milk” in *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi*, Louis Fischer offers a more concise retelling of the episode involving Gandhi’s breaking of the vow over milk consumption. After dedicating a few paragraphs to the Mahatma’s unsuccessful recruitment campaign for the British army in Kheda, Fischer describes how his “slim diet” of “peanut butter and lemons” and “the exertion” combined with “the frustration of failure” gave Gandhi a bout of dysentery (Fischer 203). In a series of succinct statements, including “[h]e fasted,” “[h]e refused medicine,” and “[h]e refused an injection,” because he thought the latter were “serums,” Fischer outlines both what he calls “the first important illness” in Gandhi’s life, and his stoical stubbornness in the face of any attempt at providing relief or treatment, adding further that the Mahatma’s body was “wasting away” (203). As his nerves “gave way,” says the biographer, Gandhi felt sure “he would die,” when a “medical practitioner” suggested “the ice treatment,” to which Fischer paraphrases Gandhi as saying, “[a]nything, as long as it was outside” (203). The description continues in the form of more tersely worded sentences: “[t]he ice helped,” following which “[a]ppetite returned,” and when the doctor suggested “sterilized eggs with no life in them,” Gandhi remained “obdurate” (203).

“The doctors,” says Fischer, “advised milk,” but the “cruel manner of milking cows and buffaloes” which had “impelled Gandhi to abjure milk forever,” drew a negative response from him in this regard; “I have taken a vow never to drink milk,” he supposedly said to his physicians (203). “Here,” according to the biographer, “Kasturbai put in a stern word,” by saying, “[b]ut surely you cannot have any objection to goat’s milk,” a quote reproduced verbatim from Gandhi’s autobiography, which one presumes was the primary source when reconstructing the narrative of the episode (203). Fischer says that Gandhi “wanted to live,” which prompted him to contemplate the idea; but had he been “up to par physically,” declares the biographer, “his will might have been strong enough to reject Kasturbai’s suggestion” and the fact that he could not resist it “showed how badly he needed the milk” (203-4). The “breach of pledge,” as Gandhi described his agreement to start consuming goat’s milk, “always bothered him” and “revealed a weakness,” according to Fischer, even though Gandhi continued to be a “goat-milk drinker to his last supper” (204). The chronicler also acknowledges that Kasturba’s “insistence” was “the likely key to Gandhi’s willingness to break the vow,” saying that while Gandhi feared “neither man nor government, neither prison nor poverty nor death,” he “did fear his wife” (204). More cryptically, he adds that it was perhaps “fear mixed with guilt,” owing to which he “did not want to hurt her,” a reference to Gandhi’s belligerent need to have Kasturba subsume her individuality under the broader umbrella of ideals that he held dear (204). Unlike Gandhi in his autobiography, Fischer compresses the entire narrative of his subject’s illness, and also underscores Kasturba’s importance, with equal brevity, in compelling the Mahatma to comply with the
doctors and consume goat’s milk. In using the word “insistence” with reference to Kasturba’s stance on the matter, Fischer also accords her character a certain assertiveness, in addition to which, he forcefully brings home her influence in Gandhi’s life and decisions when it came to important matters (204). The “fear” that the Mahatma purportedly felt for his wife could be construed as healthy respect for a partner of, by then, several decades, and yet, the word “guilt” implies both a tension and malingering unhappiness in their marriage, fostered by the force of his personality, and the numerous sacrifices she had been coerced into making on behalf of his values (204).

Rajmohan Gandhi’s account of his grandfather’s illness in *Mohandas*, though brief, follows a less economic description than that by Louis Fischer, offering more insightful details as well. The biographer does not mention the cause of Gandhi’s illness, choosing to ignore the section in the Mahatma’s autobiography that points to feasting on eats prepared by Kasturba as the cause for the exacerbation of Gandhi’s dysentery, saying simply that he “collapsed” on “11 August” in Nadiad (Rajmohan Gandhi, *Mohandas*, 215). He attributes the “heat,” Gandhi’s “failure with [the recruitment of] the peasants” and, above all, “the clash between the recruiting activity and the nonviolence that he and close associates felt to be the message of his life” as the causes behind what he calls Gandhi’s “breakdown” (215). Rajmohan Gandhi, unlike Fischer, also cites Rajendra Prasad’s autobiography, where the first President of India, and then young associate of Gandhi, who was visiting him from Bihar, records that during his illness, the Mahatma “‘often wept’ and said, I do not know what God’s will is’” (215). When, “[e]xhausted in body, mind and soul,” Gandhi “reached extremity,” and was taken by Ambalal Sarabhai and his wife, Sarladevi, to “their comfortable home,” where he spent “a month with the Sarabhais,” followed by “another in the ashram at Sabarmati,” which led to a “slow recovery” (215). Rajmohan Gandhi makes no mention of his grandfather’s refusal to be treated with any medication, nor does he discuss Gandhi’s view that the ailment, however severe, had to be endured as a punishment for his excessive enjoyment of Kasturba’s food. He does say, however, that there were “moments in between,” when Gandhi believed that he “was dying” as a consequence of which, he “did not wish even to talk or read” (215). Differing from his grandfather’s autobiography, Rajmohan Gandhi says that his grandfather was informed by doctors that “he had no chance of recovery unless he took milk,” only after he underwent surgery “on boils afflicting him” in Bombay in January of 1919 (219). Gandhi, adds the biographer, “remembered that his father had died following boils,” and “wanted to live,” even though, on his forty-ninth birthday celebrated three months before, he had “dictated letters” to Harilal, his oldest son, and Devadas, his youngest son, saying they should be “ready for his death” (219). It was Kasturba, says Rajmohan Gandhi, who “brilliantly found a way out,” reminding her husband that when he took the vow, “he had cows, not goats, in mind” (219).
The biographer paraphrases his grandmother’s voice in a series of rhetorical questions presented in third-person. “Wasn’t he troubled by how cows were treated, and wasn’t that behind the vow? Surely the vow left him free to drink the milk of a goat?” she ostensibly asked her husband, and after “hesitating for twenty-four hours,” Gandhi accepted his wife’s “ingenious if problematic” solution, and began “sipping goat’s milk” (219). In his use of words like “brilliant” and “ingenious,” Rajmohan Gandhi’s recognition of Kasturba’s contribution to bringing Gandhi back to health is more effusive than that of the patriarch himself or by Polak and Fischer. He refers to the incident as described by the latter in his memoir on Gandhi, and also mentions that in accepting Kasturba’s suggestion, Gandhi “came down, in his own mind and the minds of some associates,” including Millie Polak’s husband, Henry, to “soiled earth” (219). Gandhi’s grandson adds, that “the fall” also made the Mahatma “more forgiving of human weakness” even as it made him “more admiring of his wife” for restoring his health, even though the “months of breakdown and weakness,” he says, left a “lasting disability” (219). Judith Brown’s retelling of Gandhi’s illness and recovery is characteristically distressing in her choice of phrases when it comes to describing Kasturba. Once again presented with extreme concision, Brown’s account spans a single long paragraph in an otherwise long text, beginning with a description of how the days in Gujarat in the latter half of 1918 when Gandhi’s “struggle with his conscience” as also with those “near to him” and those “who had flocked to him,” combined with “physical exhaustion,” precipitated “a radical collapse in his health” which “virtually remov[ed] him from public life” (Brown 127). She makes it a point to mention that Gandhi’s dysentery, contracted when he toured his home state “in search of recruits,” was “aggravated” when he ate “some food [Kasturba] had prepared in celebration of a religious festival,” and also that the Sarabhais moved him from Nadiad to their “comfortable Ahmedabad home,” to be nursed, following which Gandhi insisted on being taken back to Sabarmati Ashram (127). Brown says that this was the “severest illness” he had suffered in his life, and uses letters from the *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, to briefly discuss how he “wrote” of being in “unbearable pain which brought him almost to screaming point” (127). The “acute phase” of the dysentery, she says was followed by “extreme weakness” (127).

Gandhi’s biographer goes on to say that in late-September of 1918, Gandhi could “just walk on the verandah,” and in early-November, barely two months later, he was still “virtually bedridden” (127). In February of the following year, even as he “insisted on public work again,” Gandhi was “still weak” and suffering from what Brown calls “erratic” health; by this time, she adds, he had also undergone a “surgery for piles” (127). She cites his refusal to eat “a normal, mixed and sustaining diet” as the “main obstacle” to his recovery, and says that Gandhi’s “doctors, friends,” and “the faithful [Kasturba]” despaired of what the
Mahatma called his “crankisms” (127). Brown adds, uncharitably, that “his wife’s dumb misery” which the author quotes Gandhi as calling “cow-like,” put “considerable pressure” on him, as did his “friends’ concern and his natural will to live” (127). Her consistently derogatory tone with reference to Kasturba renders the latter literally mute in the use of the word “dumb,” before Brown goes on to say that Gandhi had “asked about substitutes to cow’s milk” in the early days of his illness, and “eventually agreed to drink goat’s milk to build up his strength,” with no mention of Kasturba’s suggestion, or Gandhi’s assent to his wife’s persuasion in the matter (127). In marginalising Kasturba’s role in an already compressed retelling of the incident, Brown once again presents Gandhi as a monolithic figure, his ‘self’ obscuring all ‘others,’ including and especially his wife, denying her any substance or agency in their life together. The biographer says that while Gandhi did not “break the letter of his vow,” and was “at pains” to justify his stance when he first started consuming goat’s milk, he eventually came to feel that he had “broken it in spirit” (127). She adds that enforced rest during his illness made him “brood deeply on the nature of the truth and truth force” during which he also experienced “the outpouring of concern from friends,” none of whom she names, in response to which, she believes, Gandhi felt he was “called to serve more humanity” (127). Thus, the focus of Brown’s narrative, unfortunately, remains Gandhi’s illness, and his recovery, his battle with his conscience, and his need to redefine the parameters of the truth which he so fervently sought, with no desire to unfold the context within which he operated, and the people and forces which operated on him in turn. Kasturba appears almost as an addendum in Brown’s discourse, and never as a key player in Gandhi’s life and work.

On the other hand, Arun Gandhi’s account of Gandhi’s near-life-threatening illness and his interaction with Kasturba during that period unfolds in painstaking detail in his biography on Kasturba. In the midst of Gandhi’s recruitment campaign for the British army, says his grandson, when he arrived at the Sabarmati Ashram on a “mid-August morning” for one of his “periodic visits” his wife was “horrified,” because while she had been “worried” about her husband and had “known instinctively” that he was “depressed,” she was thrown by his “gaunt, half-starved, wraith-like figure,” which Gandhi explained away as “a mild case of dysentery,” saying that he had been fasting “to cure himself” (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 224). Kasturba, says Arun Gandhi, had a “better prescription,” and so, for his mid-day meal, she prepared, “a bowl full of lentils and some sweetened wheat porridge,” both of which she knew were Mohandas’s “favourite foods” (224). Viewing the incident from Kasturba’s perspective, her biographer-grandson says that Gandhi ate the preparations “with relish” and even asked “for second helpings,” as a result of which Kasturba was “much relieved,” and urged her husband to stay on in Sabarmati a few days longer so she could “fatten him up,” – a representation that reveals the typical concern and affection of a devoted wife, and
a far cry from Gandhi’s own recollection saying he “succumbed” to the food with which his wife “tempted” him (224). Mohandas insisted on returning to the recruitment headquarters in Nadiad that evening, only to “collapse,” stricken by what Arun Gandhi calls “the longest and most serious illness of his life” (224). The biographer describes his grandfather’s condition in some detail saying his dysentery “became acute” as he grew “feverish,” sometimes “delirious” and at other times “unable to move and scarcely able to speak,” to the extent that Gandhi was “convinced” that he “was dying” (224). Even as the doctors said that Mohandas had suffered a “nervous breakdown” brought on by “exhaustion,” Arun Gandhi says that his grandfather, who “generally distrusted doctors,” “clung” to his own explanation for his illness, namely, “overeating” (224). Quoting from Gandhi’s recollection of the incident in his autobiography, where he holds Kasturba responsible for enticing him with forbidden food, Arun Gandhi points out that his grandfather believed that “self-condemnation for his overindulgence (if it was such)” should be “equally shared by his wife” (225). In telling the story from Kasturba’s point-of-view, the biographer enables the reader to recognise how “frantic” she was upon hearing of Gandhi’s illness, as she received reports saying he had “refused all medicines,” was receiving “almost no nourishment,” and “growing weaker each day” (225).

However, since there is no evident source material that documents her thoughts, feelings or responses to the situation, Arun Gandhi’s empathy for his grandmother’s position is rendered ineffectual; even as he speaks of how Kasturba “fear ed” that there was no one to look after Gandhi in Nadiad, and that though she wanted to have her husband brought back to the ashram, he was “far too ill” to make the journey by train (225). When the Sarabhais brought Gandhi to their house in Ahmedabad, where they provided him with the “best medical care available,” Arun Gandhi says that Kasturba “visited him daily,” and encouraged him to “take food and accept treatment,” as her husband’s health improved “slowly” and “painfully” (225). Eventually, Gandhi “insisted” on returning to Sabarmati, which, says the biographer, was a “hopeful sign” for his wife, even though his “stated reason,” namely, that he wanted “to die in his own ashram” was a “gloomy” one (225). With Gandhi’s return to Sabarmati, Arun Gandhi steers the narrative chronologically to discuss the “awesome catastrophe” that was the influenza pandemic of 1918 which claimed the lives of Harilal’s wife, Gulab, and her youngest son, Shanti, in October of that year, as a result of which, Kasturba left her husband alone for a few days and rushed to Rajkot to help her eldest son and his children cope with a “doubly devastating” loss (225-6). After agreeing to take charge of Harilal’s four surviving children because he could “not do it alone,” and because the burden was “too great for Gulab’s widowed mother and sisters,” Kasturba had to “hurry back to Sabarmati,” because, as her grandson puts it, “Bapu needed her, and she needed to be with him,” a simple assertion of Kasturba’s resilience in the face of multiple personal
crises, and also her profound sense of duty towards the various members of her family, starting with her husband (227). Upon her return, in Arun Gandhi’s narrative, she found Mohandas “more despondent than ever,” still “bedridden,” and “without an appetite,” in addition to which he suffered “excruciating pain” from a “fistula caused by his protracted bout with dysentery” to alleviate which he was “submitting himself” to “radical treatments” prescribed by “new doctors,” including ice packs, and injections of arsenic and strychnine which Gandhi had rejected (227-8). “Finding no relief,” adds the author, Gandhi “abandoned hope,” and at one point, “gathered his ashram friends around him” to deliver his own “self-condemnatory requiem,” following which his friends seemed “more than happy” to “relinquish care of the invalid” to Kasturba (228).

While Gandhi’s autobiography, and the ensuing biographies on him that have been examined in the course of this study, do not make any specific reference to Kasturba’s nursing of her husband during the course of this episode – even as they write about, and valorise her husband’s ability and desire to nurse various ailing members of the immediate family, including Kasturba herself – it certainly points to a failing in Gandhi’s documentation of the illness in his personal narrative, and also testifies to a long-held and deeply patriarchal belief that in nursing her husband, a woman is merely fulfilling her most basic responsibility towards an esteemed family member, and that it is a service unworthy of mention, unless performed by a male member in contravention of accepted gender roles within the Indian family set-up. In bringing to the fore the idea that Gandhi’s illness had direct bearing on his wife, who was his primary nurse and caregiver through the long duration of his infirmity, Arun Gandhi successfully draws Kasturba from the margins of the accepted male-centric narrative on the prolonged episode to its very centre. He says that Gandhi’s friends hoped that “Ba’s tender ministrations” would “ease his pain” and “free him from broodings about death,” but the patriarch had come to “resent his wife’s concern” and even “her presence” (228). Using Mahadev Desai’s notes as a source, the biographer details a “particularly shocking outburst,” where Gandhi said that he “simply cannot bear to look at Ba’s face,” comparing what his grandson calls the “wordless pain” that he saw there to “the expression often seen on the face of a ‘meek cow,’” adding also, in his diatribe, that there was “‘selfishness in this suffering of hers,’” which he then corrected by saying that despite his evident resentment, Kasturba’s “gentleness overpowers me” and “I feel inclined to relax in all matters” (228). The use of the term “meek cow” in the context of Gandhi’s illness and what Arun Gandhi refers to as the “lowest point in his depression” allows the reader to understand the nature of the Mahatma’s grievance, driven by illness, against his wife, as also his equally forceful need for her temperament to alleviate his emotional and physical anxieties (228). Unlike Judith Brown, who merely employs the word “cow-like” without any reference to the context in which the description was offered, and thereby contributes
towards the misrepresentation and misinterpretation both, of Kasturba, and Gandhi’s relationship with her, the latter’s biographer uses the outburst to establish a living, human, and sympathetic and symbiotic relationship between husband and wife.

According to Arun Gandhi’s account, Kasturba, too, was “losing patience” with her husband; Gandhi’s “refusal to take proper food, his reluctance to accept remedies other than the ones he prescribed for himself,” and his diagnosis “that he was at death’s door,” which had been “discounted by every doctor who had been consulted,” amounted, to her mind, as “nothing less than an assault on himself” (228). In her grandson’s view, she saw Gandhi, in his stubbornness and recalcitrance as “inflicting violence on his own body and mind,” to the extent that he was “ready to die,” an attitude, which she recognised “had to stop” (228). Resorting to conjecture yet again, the biographer says that having just returned from a “house full of death, uninvited death,” Kasturba could not choose “anything less than life” and was determined to “rescue her husband from himself” by “whatever means she could devise” (228-9). Arun Gandhi says that “Bapu’s pain” worked in “Ba’s favo[u]r,” as a consequence of which he “agreed to go with her to Bombay” to consult “an orthodox physician,” clearly indicating that Kasturba had a far more vital role in bringing her husband to the point of considering the consumption of goat’s milk (229). It was she who pushed him to consult Dr. Dalal in the metropolis in the first place, a decisive step in initiating his overall recovery. In this version of events, the physician told Mohandas that “only surgery” could bring relief from pain, and “full recovery” from the “malady causing it;” adding that he could not perform the surgery unless Gandhi began “building up his strength” by “taking milk at frequent intervals” (229). Kasturba, says Arun Gandhi, “was standing by Bapu’s bed” when the doctor offered his diagnosis, and “listened quietly” as her husband voiced his protest against milk consumption, saying he had given up taking milk “as a matter of principle” owing to the “cruel methods used by some Indian farmers to milk cattle” (229). The biographer declares that it was clear to her, that despite his illness, Gandhi remained “stubborn as ever” (229). Her mind “working furiously,” she took “a moment’s pause” before “softly, but firmly” reminding her husband that he could not have “any objection to goat’s milk,” presenting a seemingly “modest proposal” which Dr. Dalal “seized upon,” leaving Gandhi “momentarily nonplus[s]ed” (229). As he began to “sort through his thoughts,” however, says his grandson, Mohandas realised that his wife had “overpowered” him with “her gentleness” (229).

Gandhi came to the recognition that while “a vow was a vow,” it was likely that “Ba was right,” and that though he had been thinking of cows when he “swore never to drink milk,” goats had “not crossed his mind,” and so, he could, perhaps, “drink goat’s milk and keep his vow, too,” and in the process, find the strength to “renew his Satyagraha struggles” against
the British government (229). That afternoon, says the account, Mohandas “took his first glass of goat’s milk,” relegating the dissonance in Gandhi’s mind over the decision to consume what he considered a proscribed food item, to a quote from the Mahatma’s autobiography where he says that “[t]he will to live proved stronger than the devotion to truth,” adding that Gandhi regarded his decision, in hindsight, as a “kind of compromise with his conscience,” even though from that day on, goat’s milk became “a mainstay of his diet” (229). It is in this construction that Arun Gandhi’s narrative concerning Gandhi’s illness truly stumbles. In attempting to foreground Kasturba’s quiet resilience, and her ability to influence her husband in crucial situations, it oversimplifies Gandhi’s inner struggles as a result of his decision to resume the consumption of milk, something he viewed as a serious breach of a highly cherished principle. And since his wider notions of Satyagraha and nonviolence held their roots in the way he approached his body and spirit, going back on his word with regard to the taking of milk made him realise how tenuous his attitude towards his code of conduct was. Arun Gandhi says that “thanks to Kasturba,” Mohandas “made peace with himself,” and signed “an armistice with the realities of life” (229). While the latter might indeed be true; an idea to which Gandhi himself conceded in the course of his description of the episode in his autobiography, the former is a very problematic statement (229). The Mahatma had far from made “peace” with his decision, and went so far as to state that it had rendered the vow he had taken hollow, and continued to gall him over a decade later as he sat down to document the incident. He might have admired Kasturba’s ingenuity in that moment, but his detailing of the episode does not present her in the most appreciative light, something that his grandson tends to elide in favour of what would qualify as a ‘resolute’ and ‘happy’ ending.

4.5 SMALLER INCIDENTS THAT FEATURE KASTURBA IN THE BIOGRAPHICAL LITERATURE UNDER REVIEW

4.5.1 Meeting Harilal at Katni Station (1936)

The incident involving Gandhi and Kasturba encountering their oldest son, Harilal, at the Katni train station does not find mention in most of the texts under scrutiny in this study. Gandhi’s autobiography documents incidents in his life up until 1920, while Ramachandra Guha’s *Gandhi before India* chronicles the Mahatma’s life only till his return to India from South Africa in January 1915. This episode is said to have taken place sometime in 1936, although the exact date of its occurrence has not been made available to us by any of the biographies examined in this study. Neither Louis Fischer nor Judith Brown mention the
incident in their accounts of Gandhi, and why they chose to ignore it altogether is a matter of pure speculation. The texts that do address it frontally are Rajmohan Gandhi’s Mohandas: A True Story of a Man, his People and an Empire; and Arun Gandhi’s Forgotten Woman: The Untold Story of Kastur, Wife of Mahatma Gandhi. Interestingly, both books have been penned by grandsons of the Gandhis, each attempting to represent/construct an individual grandparent. Rajmohan Gandhi’s biography contains the direct excerpt recollecting the incident from its source, Narayan Desai’s memoir, Bliss Was it to be Young with Gandhi: Childhood Reminiscences. For the purposes of this study, we will carry out a close reading of the incident as reproduced from its original in Rajmohan Gandhi’s book, following which we will examine its reconstruction from Kasturba’s perspective in Arun Gandhi’s biography of his grandmother. The former presents this episode in the wake of a detailed recounting of Harilal Gandhi’s controversial and short lived conversion to Islam, and eventual reconversion to Hinduism in an “Arya Samaj ceremony,” after which he adopted a new name, Hiralal, in an attempt to forge an identity different from that into which he was born as Gandhi’s son (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 400). Rajmohan Gandhi then turns to what he calls “a first-hand account of an encounter at about this time,” penned by Narayan Desai, the son of Gandhi’s faithful secretary and amanuensis, Mahadev Desai, which he reproduces verbatim in full, of a childhood recollection when he was accompanying the Gandhis on a train journey to Wardha (400). When the train stopped at a station, unmentioned in this narrative, the travelling party led by the Gandhis “heard a cry from the crowd” which was “different from the usual,” saying “Mata Kasturba ki jai” (400). Tracing the source of the chant, they discovered, says Desai, that it was “Harilalkaka” (400).

In a succinct and evocative description, Desai says that Harilal was “emaciated,” his front teeth “were gone,” and his hair “had turned grey” (400). His general decrepitude comes through in a mention of his “ragged clothes,” from the pocket of which he “took an orange,” handing it to his mother saying, “Ba, I have brought this for you” (400). At this point, the Mahatma is said to have interrupted the conversation between mother and son, and asked his estranged first-born, “Didn’t you bring anything for me?” to which Harilal replied in the negative, saying to his father, “All the greatness you have achieved is only because of Ba. Don’t forget that!” (400). Gandhi replied saying there was “no doubt about it,” and asked his son if he would like to join them on their journey back to Wardha, only to meet with a resolute “Oh no. I only came to see Ba,” in response (400). Handing the orange to his mother, Harilal said he had “begged for it,” adding emphatically, “It is only for you, all right? If you are not going to eat it yourself, give it back to me,” making it abundantly clear that he did not want her to share the gift he had procured with great difficulty with Gandhi (400). The account then says that Kasturba “promised” to eat the orange and even “pleaded” with her son to join them, but with “eyes full of tears,” Harilal ostensibly asked her to “leave off
such talk,” because “[t]here is no way out of this for me,” indicating he felt both shame over his actions, and despair over his future (400). As the train pulled out of the station, Kasturba realised that she hadn’t asked “the poor boy” if he wanted “anything to eat” (400). “We have a basket full of fruits,” she lamented, adding “My dear child must be dying of hunger” (400). In the distance, amidst cries of “Gandhiji ki jai!” says Desai’s account, the travellers could still hear “the faint cry,” “Mata Kasturba ki jai” (400). In retaining Narayan Desai’s original narrative without any editorialising, Rajmohan Gandhi offers his tacit agreement with its content, and an equally unspoken sympathy towards the relationship between Harilal and Kasturba, one that was strained and fractured by the former’s disagreement with his father. It reveals the depth of Harilal’s ruin and disgrace, as also his great devotion to his mother for the numerous sacrifices she had made in order to sustain Gandhi’s public and private achievements.

Arun Gandhi’s version of the account in his biography on Kasturba differs from that presented by Rajmohan Gandhi in matters of chronology. Unlike Rajmohan Gandhi, who claims that the incident occurred sometime in 1936, after Harilal’s ill-fated tryst with an Islamic identity, Arun Gandhi offers no specific year for its occurrence, saying merely that the encounter took place on one of Kasturba’s many “tours with Bapu,” even before the All India Literary Conference in Nagpur in April 1936, where they “unexpectedly” and “unhappily” ran into Harilal, who “announced” to his parents that several of his friends of “various faiths” were “seeking to convert him to their religions,” saying therefore that the incident occurred well in advance of his religious conversion (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 266). Arun Gandhi begins by describing how the train ferrying Gandhi and Kasturba, among others, “halted briefly at the small town of Katni,” where a “crowd of darshan-seekers” waited on the platform “hoping for a glimpse of Mohandas,” as the “usual shouts” of “Mahatma Gandhi ki jai!” “filled the air” (266). Then, says the biographer, Kasturba heard a voice raised “above all the others,” shouting “Mata Kasturba ki jai!” which Arun Gandhi loosely translates as “Victory to Mother Kasturba!” (266). “Peering through the train window,” he continues, she was “startled” to see Harilal, “standing on the platform dressed in rags,” and looking “old and ill” (266). Her oldest son “pushed his way through the crowd” and “handed her an orange,” calling it a “token of my love” (266). The re-telling ascribes no dialogues to either Kasturba or Gandhi. It merely says that Harilal turned to his father and said, “If you are so great, you owe it all to Ba,” adding that before there was “time to say anything else,” the train pulled out of the station, and as it gathered speed, Kasturba heard Harilal’s voice shouting “Mata Kasturba ki jai” once again (266). The narrative ends with Arun Gandhi saying that while Kasturba had “always defended Harilal,” and “found excuses for him,” she occasionally felt that the conflict between her husband and her son “was taking place in her own heart,” and her “heartache” was for “them both” (266-7). Unlike
Rajmohan Gandhi, Arun Gandhi offers his own interpretation of the account, truncating the details he perceives as excessive within the narrative, and focussing entirely on Harilal's devotion to his mother. In editing out the lines ascribed to Gandhi and Kasturba in Desai’s original, he effectively removes them both from the action. Equally importantly, in culling out Kasturba’s helplessness upon remembering that she had not given her son anything to eat, despite having a basket full of fruit in the compartment, he makes the telling more one-sided and static, robbing her of any real participation in the incident.

4.5.2 Entering the Puri Jagannath Temple against Gandhi’s Wishes (1938)

The incident involving Kasturba's entry into the Puri Jagannath temple in Orissa in 1938, against Gandhi's wishes owing to the temple's policy of not allowing untouchables to worship within premises, features in three of the biographies under scrutiny in this study. It appears first in Judith Brown's *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope*, followed by which it is discussed in Rajmohan Gandhi’s *Mohandas: The Story of a Man, his People and an Empire*, and Arun Gandhi's *Forgotten Woman: the Untold Story of Kastur, Wife of Mahatma Gandhi*. Brown’s mention of the episode is characteristically brief, and equally dismissive of Kasturba and her role in the Mahatma’s life. Her discussion of the incident is preceded by that of Gandhi's recurring illness and fatigue in 1937 and early 1938 (Brown 284). She then says that his "collapses" were rarely due "solely to overwork," and that the "mental and physical strain to which he constantly exposed himself" was often "overlaid with emotional tension or distress" which caused a physical breakdown (284). She cites the visit by Kasturba and Mahadev Desai's wife, Durga, to the Puri Jagannath temple in March of the same year as an example of "emotional distress," which, in her view, "provoked" Gandhi's "dangerously high blood pressure" (284). Brown uses Gandhi’s correspondence with his colleague and disciple, Amrit Kaur, sourced from the Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi, and Kaur’s personal papers, to state that the Mahatma "admitted" that the incident "'upset me terribly,'" and also that there was a "profound crisis" in his "immediate circle" on the matter (284). Brown offers no details on the unfolding of events concerning the incident, and offers no insights from Kasturba’s perspective, remaining content, yet again, to present her as an illiterate and unimaginative liability to his personal life and public image. She appears in a fraction of the text, and only in the excessively concise, typically derogatory representations that reduce her individuality and stature, repeatedly and deliberately. In Rajmohan Gandhi’s *Mohandas*, interestingly, the incident appears in the chapter, ‘Dream under Fire,’ under the subtopic, ‘Mahadev Desai’ focussing the attention of the narrative on its impact on the relationship Gandhi shared with his faithful secretary and confidant of several decades. Kasturba, is reduced to a marginal player in the reproduction of the episode. It starts by saying that
when Gandhi, accompanied by Kasturba, Mahadev and Durga Desai, and “several others” were visiting Orissa “[a]t the end of March 1938,” the patriarch heard that “Kasturba, Mahadev’s wife Durga, and a woman relative of Durga’s” had “gone inside” Puri’s Jagannath Temple, to which “Harijans could not go” (Rajmohan Gandhi, Mohandas, 414).

The biographer also adds in parenthesis that Gandhi had been “abused near this temple’s entrance” four years prior to the incident (414). Rajmohan Gandhi says that his grandfather was “shocked” and “troubled” when he heard of the transgression because he had been told that “the whole of Puri” was talking about Kasturba’s visit inside the temple” (414). He fleshes out the magnitude of the lapse in a principle that Gandhi held dear, by adding a quote from Narayan Desai’s memoir, Bliss Was it to be Young with Gandhi: Childhood Reminiscences, saying “Even the station master asked us, ‘Did Kasturba really enter the temple?’” (414). “Chastised by Gandhi,” says the writer, “the women wept,” and Kasturba even said that she was “wrong to have gone inside,” but Gandhi’s “strongest rebuke,” adds his grandson, “was reserved for Desai,” whom the Mahatma believed “should have instructed the women” against entering the temple (414). Narayan, Mahadev Desai’s son, who was only fifteen at the time, was praised by Gandhi, because though he accompanied the women to the temple, he had “refused to go inside” (414). Implicit in the Mahatma’s critique of Desai’s transgression--that of not preventing the women--as opposed to those of Kasturba and Durga, who actually entered the temple sanctum sanctorum, is the gender bias against the wrongdoer. His patriarchal bent is revealed in his belief that it was common for women to err, or to use an emotional judgement, often at cost to lofty moral principles, while it was incumbent upon men to curb those potential errors, owing to their ability to comprehend such ideas more clearly. More importantly, he believed that Mahadev Desai was more ‘worthy’ of censure than his own wife, who had a propensity to work at odds with his principles owing to her socialisation into a tremendously casteist environment. Rajmohan Gandhi then offers detailed quotes from Gandhi’s speech in a public meeting held in Delang in Orissa soon after the incident, openly stating that he felt “humbled and humiliated” upon discovering that “my wife two ashram inmates whom I regard as my daughters” had entered the Puri temple (415). All three women remained unnamed in the public confession, introduced only in relation to the patriarch, as ‘Others’ to his ‘Self.’ He went on to say in the speech that the “agony” of the misdemeanour was “enough to precipitate a collapse,” and that the machine as a result recorded “an alarmingly high blood pressure” (415).

He added that while the three women went into the temple “in ignorance,” he was to blame, and more so Mahadev Desai because he “did not tell them what their dharma was,” and should have thought also of the “social repercussions” of such an act, presenting a
clearly gendered view even in his public discourse on the matter (415). More damningly, he poses a rhetorical question during the course of the speech, asking how “we” could “carry to [the Harijans]” the conviction that “we are with them through thick and thin,” and that “we are identifying ourselves with them,” unless we can carry “our families,” which include “our wives, our children, brothers, sisters, relatives,” offering a clear distinction between the logocentric male functioning as the economic and ideological head the family, who comprises the subjective “we,” and the women and younger males within the familial institution who must adhere to the beliefs held by the said ideological head in the interest of social equality (415). From here on, Rajmohan Gandhi shifts the focus entirely to Mahadev Desai, who felt, according to the biographer, that he could “take it no more,” believing that Gandhi was making “a mountain out of a molehill,” and asking therefore “to be allowed to leave” Gandhi’s entourage altogether (415). Desai expressed his displeasure in the April 1938 issue of Harijan saying that “Gandhi ‘who had performed several spiritual operations using the chloroform of love, had performed this one without that chloroform,” quoted in Rajmohan Gandhi’s account, also adding that “[t]o live with the saints in heaven is a bliss and glory, [b]ut to live with a saint on earth is a different story” [415]. The biographer says that Desai was “denied permission to leave,” and cites excerpts from a letter that Gandhi wrote his irate aide in the wake of this skirmish saying he would “tolerate thousands of mistakes,” but he could “never part” with Desai (415). In the letter, Gandhi adds, that if Desai were to leave him, neither Pyarelal Nayyar nor his sister Sushila would stay with him. "They will all run away," he laments, revealing what Rajmohan Gandhi describes as the patriarch’s "dependence on his close aides" and his "fear of losing them" (415). However, the biographer does not use this episode to analyse Gandhi’s equation with Kasturba, nor does he provide any insight into what might have propelled Kasturba towards entering the temple proscribed by her husband.

All we are given to understand is that Kasturba admitted to have been "wrong" in doing what she did (414). Whether her repentance was driven by an innate recognition of the aberration this caused in her upholding of her own values, or whether the contrition was a result of her husband’s chastisement for having violated rules he had set for his family, friends and followers, is not clear. The section proceeds to describe Gandhi and Kallenbach’s plan to have the Desai family and Mirabehn visit South Africa, to give them "a break," as described in a letter written by Gandhi to Mahadev in November of that year, but, says the writer, "the idea was never reali[ed]," thereby putting an end to any further discussion on the incident and its impact on the Mahatma’s relations with Kasturba (416). In using the episode to examine the nature of Gandhi’s relationship with his aides, the biographer does not allow the reader to engage with Kasturba’s motives or her reactions with any clarity. Arun Gandhi’s account of his grandmother’s transgression is more personal. This he
attributes to its occurrence during his family's "1938 sojourn in India," adding also that his mother, Sushila, who was with Kasturba at the time, believed that the incident "stemmed from a gross miscalculation on her mother-in-law's part," and called it Kasturba's "Himalayan blunder," a reference to Gandhi’s self-chastisement during his visit to the Punjab in 1919 (Arun and Sunanda Gandhi 276). At this stage in their lives, says Kasturba’s biographer grandson, Gandhi and Kasturba "did seem in accord on all things" and "except on rare occasions," he continues, "they were acting as one" (276). Unless Gandhi was "in poor health," Kasturba "often chose not to accompany him," says Arun Gandhi, "preferring to devote herself to her own work," but on learning that her husband was to attend a political meeting in the "remote town of Delang in Orissa province," she "announced" that she was "eager to go along" (276). She was joined by her daughter-in-law, the author’s mother, and Mahadev Desai’s wife Durgabehn, and it became "a pilgrimage of sorts," to visit the Jagannath Puri temple, which was, in Arun Gandhi’s words, "regarded by all Hindus as one of the four most important and sacred temples in all of India" (276). He then says that none of the women in the entourage had visited the temple, and “longed to do so,” even though “it was reported that Harijans were not allowed to worship” within its premises (276).

Gandhi’s “demand” that “self-respecting Hindus shun any temple refusing entry to Untouchables,” adds the biographer, was “well-known to all of them” and “especially to [Kasturba],” who had taken part in “the national campaign to open the temples to all worshippers” (276). But, in an attempt to make sense of their motives, and also perhaps, having received insights from his mother who was an eye witness at the scene of wrongdoing, Arun Gandhi says that the women “told each other” that “just looking at the great temple from outside for a few minutes” would be acceptable within the constraints in which they were operating (276). Upon arrival at Delang, he continues, Gandhi was “completely immersed, as usual” in his political work, and when Kasturba and her compatriots set out for Puri, he apparently “raised no objection,” assuming it was “a sight-seeing tour,” one during which there would even be “a form of Satyagraha” if the women “stood outside the temple, just where the Harijans were allowed to stand,” and refused “in protest” to go any further towards the shrine (276-7). Arun Gandhi discusses “how torn Kasturba must have been,” even this late into her life with Gandhi, between “loyalty to the old traditions of her Hindu upbringing” and her commitment to “the new spiritual insights her husband was giving to the world,” adding that after a few minutes of “standing outside in silent reverence” she found the “religious attraction” of the temple “irresistible” (277). She “started forward towards the entrance,” and was joined by Durga Desai, while the others “were surprised” (277). In this narrative, we are told that she was stopped by her daughter-in-law, Sushila, who ostensibly “blurted out” to Kasturba that “Bapu is against it”
even as she was “embarrassed to be speaking to her mother-in-law so boldly” (277). To this Kasturba is said to have replied with the words “we are here for the first time” and “we may never come back,” and so “I cannot leave without going into the temple” (277). Arun Gandhi does not go into a description of his grandmother’s entry into the temple, despite his mother’s eye-witness testimony. Instead, he focusses on Gandhi’s reaction to his wife’s act of disobedience, saying he was "hurt" and "angry as never before" (277). "Seeing this," says the author, Kasturba was "suddenly contrite," as a result of which she "confessed her error" and "asked forgiveness," for reasons that remain unexplained to the reader (277).

The determination with which she ostensibly entered the temple is countered by the 'suddenness' of her contrition and ensuing apology, neither of which has been dwelled upon or probed adequately. Kasturba, says Arun Gandhi, "was not the target of Bapu's ire," which the Mahatma "made clear" at a "public prayer meeting" the same night, where he ostensibly "proclaimed" that he must be "held responsible" for Kasturba's actions because he "neglected my wife's education" (277). However, the biographer adds, "in the very next breath," Gandhi was also "taking to task" Mahadev Desai, for neglecting his wife's education, saying that had Desai not been "so remiss," Durga could have "convinced Ba to stay outside," instead of "going into Puri temple with her" (277). Desai, in turn, in this narrative, was "so devastated by such criticism," that he apparently wrote a letter to the Mahatma the following day in an attempt to "resign his post as secretary," a move that "pained Bapu all the more" (277). Gandhi is quoted in the biography as asking Desai, "[i]f you are like my son, can I not rebuke you for a misdeed?" (277). Arun Gandhi goes on to say that his grandfather and his faithful secretary "healed their rift" and "purged their souls by fasting for several days," a ritual in which they were joined by "everyone involved" (277). He concludes by saying that both men "lamented the unhappy incident" and each listed "his own shameful transgression" in articles published in Harijan, adding that Desai also "confessed" to having been so "upset" by "Bapu's unexpected reproof," that he even "loudly bemoaned his fate" in the "familiar epigram," which is also cited in Rajmohan Gandhi's Mohandas (277). While Arun Gandhi attempts to present the incident of Kasturba entering the Puri Jagannath temple against Gandhi’s diktat, in some detail, we do not get a fuller understanding of the episode from Kasturba’s perspective. It is also unclear whether the matriarch discussed her perspective on the transgression with Sushila Gandhi, who in turn conveyed it to her biographer son in the capacity of an oral source, or whether the "irresistible" attraction to the temple, that the biographer describes, is yet again a product of conjecture (277). As a result, we are unable to gauge the veracity of his narrative, and his representation/construction of Kasturba in the context of this incident.
The broad objectives of this study, as discussed at the very outset, were to assess the ways in which a selection of different authors have chosen to represent/construct Kasturba Gandhi using auto/biography as a narrative literary form; to examine the contexts in which her marriage of over six decades to a decidedly complex and multifarious personality like Gandhi had been explored; to investigate their attempts to locate Gandhi and Kasturba in a specific socio-cultural, historical and political milieu; and to analyse the different factual, literary and stylistic choices made by male and female biographers/memoirists in addressing the presence/absence of Kasturba in the auto/biographical texts under scrutiny through a feminist lens. The texts reviewed as primary sources, namely, An Autobiography or The Story of My Experiments with Truth (1927) by M. K. Gandhi, Kasturba: Wife of Gandhi (1948) by Sushila Nayyar, The Life of Mahatma Gandhi (1951) by Louis Fischer, Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope (1990) by Judith Brown, The Good Boatman: A Portrait of Gandhi (1995) and Mohandas: The Story of a Man, His People and an Empire (2006) by Rajmohan Gandhi, The Forgotten Woman: The Untold Story of Kastur Gandhi, Wife of Mahatma Gandhi (1998) by Arun and Sunanda Gandhi, and Gandhi before India (2013) by Ramachandra Guha, have offered us insights into the ways in which life histories on Gandhi and Kasturba straddle the dual purposes of ‘truth-telling,’ an enterprise not driven merely by accurate and objective reportage, but by a personal investment on the part of the authors in examining and interpreting the nuances of the relationships between the principal subjects; and ‘narrative authenticity,’ one that is steeped in notions of literary and factual reliability that are considered intrinsic and vital to the genre. This duality between truth-telling and narrative authenticity is investigated in the principal chapters of this study: Chapter II analyses the paucity of basic information available on Kasturba Gandhi, the ways in which she is represented/constructed visually by different biographers, the stereotypical patriarchal and nationalist constructs within which the reader is compelled to consider and contemplate her, and the absence of literacy and agency in her shaping of her own narrative; Chapter III explores the personal dynamic in domesticity between Gandhi and Kasturba through the sixty-two years of their married life, from their wedding in adolescence to the latter’s demise in incarceration in Pune’s Aga Khan Palace; and Chapter IV examines, through a close reading of pertinent passages in the primary texts, the ways in which different authors perceive and express Kasturba’s character across the auto/biographical literature reviewed.

It can be said, therefore, that the auto/biographical texts under scrutiny in this study employ subjective and conjectural discourse in their representation of Kasturba Gandhi inasmuch as they attempt to construct a coherent persona for her based on available facts.
Gandhi’s autobiography, *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, has served as a primary text for most of the other biographers who have aspired to arrive at a cohesive image for Kasturba founded largely on their readings of Gandhi’s confessional writing. To that extent, it has had the presence of a literary palimpsest, its observations on Kasturba having been read into, interpreted and written over in good measure across most other, if not all of the, texts in this study. This also foregrounds the idea that Gandhi wrote his autobiography drawing from his personal and deeply subjective memory, as also with a clear understanding of the ‘purpose’ of the text, namely to instruct and inform the sensibilities of his readers, to exhort them to learn from his errors and be inspired by what he viewed as his political and spiritual legacy. It is a decidedly didactic enterprise, with emphases and omissions that point to the author’s discretion, and also his need to use his personal life as a space for constant experimentation, the results of which, he believed, could be implemented successfully in society at large. Kasturba’s role within those experiments, though crucial, has always been an unstable one; her position in a profoundly patriarchal system further undermining her individual identity; and her representation in Gandhi’s autobiography, consequently, held hostage by his shifting attitude towards marriage, parenthood, sexual and material desire. While he recalls his experiences with the obvious benefit of having known her intimately for nearly four decades at the time of writing the autobiography, she remains a subjective construction, appearing in the narrative in select instances to further his purposive and moralistic discourse. Some early episodes, like that of the chamber pot and the returning of expensive gifts to the Indian community in Durban, project Kasturba as having a feisty and spirited personality, but we see less and less of her as the narrative progresses, and since the autobiography ends in 1920, it does not offer any insights into their last two decades together as an ageing couple in a uniquely defined marriage helming India’s struggle for independence against the British. Gandhi wrote from the position of a national leader; champion of India’s marginalised communities, including peasants, untouchables and women; social reformer and teacher, all of which inform, retrospectively, the nature of the autobiographical text and its audience.

Gandhi’s autobiography, as also the other biographies in this study, locate the Mahatma and Kasturba in a specific socio-cultural and historical context, collectively spanning seventy-eight years in all, from the year of Gandhi’s birth in 1869 to his death in 1948. These texts cover the lives of the couple from their early years in Porbandar and Rajkot in Gujarat, to Gandhi’s three-years in London as a student of law during which we have next to no information on Kasturba; to the approximately two decades that the couple spent in South Africa, first in Durban and then in Johannesburg; all the way to their involvement in India’s freedom struggle in the first half of the twentieth century in different parts of the country. Each biographer, however, makes factual and literary choices to emphasise certain aspects
of Gandhi and Kasturba’s lives, while simultaneously understating other aspects of their subjects’ life history. Their individual representation of Kasturba in the context of Gandhi’s life, and her participation in the larger social and political history within which the couple operated offers variations, as examined in the previous chapter dealing with close readings of key incidents involving both actors. Sushila Nayyar’s memoir, *Kasturba: Wife of Gandhi* (1948), the earliest publication of the life histories examined in this study, like Arun Gandhi’s biography of his grandmother that was published over five decades later, is particularly useful to us owing to the fact that Kasturba is its principal subject. It therefore enables the reader to engage with her more fully than the other biographies focussing on the Mahatma in the study do; in addition to which it is also written with the immediacy of a first-person interaction with the subject recollected from memory. While this foregrounds the author’s subjectivity in the telling of (a part of) Kasturba’s life, it also infuses the writing with a notion of ‘authenticity’ borne of prolonged personal contact. Louis Fischer’s *The Life of Mahatma Gandhi* (1951) views her as an invaluable aide and partner to Gandhi, and yet as one who merits no more than an occasional appearance across a few chapters. Judith Brown’s telling of the Mahatma’s life in *Gandhi: Prisoner of Hope* (1990), while attempting to de-mystify Gandhi’s larger-than-life public persona through an insightful reading of his personal anxieties and failures, views him tragically as a monolith, offering next to no information on those close to him, including Kasturba, whom she repeatedly reduces, with little sympathy, to the position of a liability in Gandhi’s life.

Rajmohan Gandhi, in *The Good Boatman: A Portrait of Gandhi* (1996) and *Mohandas: The Story of a Man, His People and an Empire* (2005), attempts to offer a scholarly corrective to this perspective, through a compassion possibly borne of the fact that Kasturba was his grandmother. Kasturba, to that extent, is more ‘visible’ in his biographical narratives, underlining the emotional, physical and material constraints under which she was compelled to live as Gandhi’s wife. He is also the only biographer among those examined in this study to make any reference to Gandhi’s brief relationship with Sarladevi Chaudhrani and its impact on his marriage to Kasturba. Arun Gandhi’s endeavour to present his grandmother as an individual in her own right, and not merely as an appendage to his illustrious grandfather, in *The Forgotten Woman: The Untold Story of Kastur Gandhi, Wife of Mahatma Gandhi* (2002), is written with affectionate sentiment, but is, perhaps, for want of available facts, a slender book in comparison to the more voluminous texts available on Gandhi, and does not fill in the gaps present in the other books, especially in the long periods of their marriage when Gandhi and Kasturba were apart. Gandhi comes to occupy centre stage across several swathes of the narrative, during his time in England, his early years in Durban, and later in Johannesburg, when Kasturba was in Bombay, as also during his long months of travel across India in the later years of their marriage. The idiom of the
biography presents a departure from that of the other texts in this study, with Arun Gandhi choosing to ‘re-create’ and ‘imagine’ aspects of Kasturba’s life and consciousness, especially in her early years, encouraging the reader to appraise the subject as a protagonist in a novel, in a problematic bid to achieve narrative seamlessness and resolution, thereby blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction with regard to several aspects of her life. While loosely mentioning the use of ‘oral’ sources at the outset, the biography also steadfastly refuses to name them, rendering his representation of Kasturba even more untenable. Ramachandra Guha’s *Gandhi before India* (2013) offers a detailed and discerning analysis of Gandhi’s formative years in India, England and South Africa, and within its scope as the first of a two-volume biography on the Mahatma, also attempts to explore his relationship with Kasturba and the nuances of her life with sympathetic and human observations. Guha has also actively chosen to look outside the realm of the *Complete Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, mining information from contemporary newspapers in South Africa and Hermann Kallenbach’s personal papers, which expose the tensions in Gandhi’s equation with Kasturba through private correspondence between Kallenbach and Gandhi. However, the book’s narrative ends with the Gandhis’ return to India from South Africa in early 1915, as a result of which we are denied insights into the mature phase of their marriage.

Through the course of this study, one encounters many facets of Kasturba Gandhi. She has been represented as a woman who has led an undoubtedly unique life, ostensibly as a result of being married, for the better part of it, to Mahatma Gandhi, a man whose life was unflinchingly dedicated to the quest for what he believed was a higher truth. As an upper middle-class and upper caste Hindu woman born and raised in the nineteenth century, she had the rare distinction of transgressing the domestic space to which most women of her background were traditionally consigned, and participating vigorously in the public sphere, first in South Africa and later in India. *The Story of My Experiments with Truth* and the biographies under scrutiny in this study candidly acknowledge Kasturba’s steely grit and determination as an individual and as a satyagrahi in Gandhi’s non-violent campaign; her capacity for rigorous discipline and self-mortification; her leadership skills made evident in the way women across India chose to emulate her during the freedom struggle, and the way she managed Gandhi’s ashrams in South Africa and India; her ability to endure repeated and harsh prison sentences, as also long spells of separation from her husband and children in a life dedicated to the cause of India’s independence. And yet, the overarching narrative of her life in the popular imagination still unfolds within the gendered construct of the ‘pativrata’ and the ‘Mother of the Nation,’ as a woman whose identity was inextricably enmeshed with that of her husband, and whose life-history was therefore entirely premised on the fact of her enduring albeit tumultuous marriage to arguably one of the greatest icons
of modern Indian history; as a woman who struggled between the social and cultural conventions within which she was raised and the radical reform introduced by her more liberal-minded spouse; as a woman who was happiest raising her children and grandchildren, even as she nurtured and fed Gandhi’s numerous young colleagues and disciples throughout their communal life in the ashrams; as a woman who unequivocally subsumed her material, emotional and sexual desires under the aegis of Gandhi’s quest for that truth. Such representation/construction of Kasturba also raises an implicit, albeit vital, question regarding her ‘worthiness’ as a biographical subject: does her life become more ‘meaningful’ by virtue of her lifelong association with Gandhi? Was she possessed of the imagination, intelligence and drive required to galvanise social and political change at the national level as an individual? Or was she merely a soldier in her husband’s army, a woman obliged to commit her life to his cause owing to her precarious position in a patriarchal society? More importantly, would Kasturba’s life not merit a biography had she remained firmly entrenched within the four walls of domesticity and not entered the public realm as ‘Ba’ at all?

Even as this study aspires to throw open the doors to further enquiry on biographical renderings of Kasturba, it must be acknowledged that any chronicle on Kasturba is impeded by two prominent factors; the first being the near absence of substantive contemporary factual information available on her, and the second being the seeming absence of any personal record or account produced by the subject herself. Most biographical texts under examination in this study, with an exception of those by Arun Gandhi and Ramachandra Guha, offer no information on Kasturba in the first thirteen years of her life before she married Gandhi, and there are no photographs of her from early life either. It could be argued, again, therefore, that her persona and life history have been imagined and constructed around her identity as the Mahatma’s wife. We have been told repeatedly by Gandhi and ensuing biographers examined in this study of her lack of formal education and her inability to read and write fluently in any language with an exception of rudimentary Gujarati. Millie Polak’s memoir, *Mr Gandhi: The Man*, indicates that Kasturba had managed to learn the basics of spoken English during their time together in Johannesburg, and Sushila Nayyar too mentions that Kasturba did have a grasp of broken Hindustani, which enabled her to communicate with the latter during her visits to Sabarmati Ashram. Nayyar also discusses Kasturba’s slow and painstaking attempts to read the letters written to her by Gandhi when she was in the former’s care in Delhi in 1939, and makes a passing mention of Kasturba’s diaries, implying that the latter did have access to language and expression, however tenuous. And yet, we do not encounter her story, or parts thereof in the form of an authentic first-person testimony, making Kasturba’s narrative a product of the subjective appraisal, interpretation and construction of those who choose to represent her both in
biographies on Gandhi and biographies/memoirs on her. Sushila Nayyar, Louis Fischer, Judith Brown, Rajmohan Gandhi, Arun Gandhi, and Ramachandra Guha, as products of varied socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, employ their individual filters and biases -- shaped in no small measure by the different periods in modern history during which they wrote -- when mapping the key facets of their subjects as also events in their personal and public lives, the results of which can be seen in their diverse representations of Gandhi and Kasturba. While Gandhi bridged the gap between the private and the public, through a prolific documentation of both aspects of his life in the form of letters, pamphlets, news articles, books, and of course, his autobiography; Kasturba’s reticence has rendered her eerily silent in the popular imagination, emerging only within multiple adaptations of the stereotypical tropes discussed earlier.

Kasturba is also constructed/ imagined to meet the specific linguistic and cultural proclivities of the readership to which each writer caters, destabilising her position as a coherent literary and historical subject even further. Interestingly, one of the key objectives of the study, namely to examine the way male and female biographers approach and interpret the subject, has yielded curious findings. The male writers, most of who focus on Gandhi, undoubtedly offer Kasturba limited scope and presence in their texts, and yet their engagement with her persona seems compassionate. Of the two women biographers included in this study, Sushila Nayyar is the one who brings Kasturba to the centre of the action by writing a short but insightful memoir on her. Her representation of Kasturba offers us a strong, considerate, efficient, resilient and yet deeply flawed woman, taking us through spells in her life that have not been documented by the other writers under scrutiny in this study. Judith Brown, on the other hand, writes about Gandhi to the point of brutally marginalising the role of his wife. Her engagement with Kasturba is curiously distant and often one of repeated disparagement, as has been examined in some detail in Chapter IV which offers a close reading of the ways in which Kasturba has been represented/constructed across the primary texts. Arun Gandhi, the only male writer in this study to make Kasturba the focus of his literary investigation, writes of his grandmother with more sympathy, admiration and affection, even if his construction of her remains problematic. Finally, it must be reiterated that this study operates within certain limitations, looking as it does at texts produced in, or translated into, English. As a result, it does not have the benefit of exploring and examining biographical literature published on Gandhi and Kasturba in other Indian languages, especially Hindi and Gujarati. Even within these linguistic constraints, only select popular texts have been chosen for scrutiny, further containing the scope of this study. And yet, each of the texts, in attempting to straddle what Arnold and Blackburn call “the elusive divide” between “personal narrative” and “objective truth,” offers us contested sites for the creation of a coherent biographical identity for an
extraordinary woman whose life defied conventions and boundaries in numerous ways (Arnold and Blackburn 4).
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BIO-NOTE

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