

# Gender, Nation and Culture in Colonial and Post Colonial India, Revisiting the Legacy of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (1903-1988)

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## ABSTRACT

This paper delves into the multifaceted legacy of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, a pioneering Indian feminist, nationalist and cultural advocate. Through a critical historical analysis, it traces and examines Kamaladevi's contributions to the intersections of gender, nation, and culture in colonial and post colonial India. By examining her writings, activism and institutional endeavours, the study reveals how Kamaladevi navigated complex power dynamics to challenge patriarchal norms, colonial domination and cultural erasure. The paper also explores how her work influenced the development of feminist thought, nationalist movements, and cultural preservation efforts in India. By illuminating the complexities and contradictions of Kamaladevi's legacy, the study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the historical and contemporary struggles for gender equality, national sovereignty, and cultural revitalization in India. Ultimately, the study demonstrates how Kamaladevi's life and work continue to inspire and inform social justice movements in India and beyond.

**Keywords: Kamala devi, freedom, women, rights, nation.**

### Introduction

As a Freedom Fighter and Woman Activist, Kamaladevi's service to the society and nation was unmatched. Her unstinted contributions to various fields revealed her characteristic versatility. She was greatly influenced by writing of Tilak and meetings with Annie Beasant, Pandita Ramabai and Ramabai Ranade. Though in her initial political career she was unsuccessful, but she continued to participate in Conferences, Meetings and gradually got involved in political events and activities. She urged the Congress to pass a motion condemning the Government for its death sentence on Bhagat Singh. The years 1927, 1928, 1929, 1930, 1944, 1955, 1959, 1966, '974, 1987 etc. proved to a turning point in multidimensional career of Kamaladevi who was a rebel in the words of one of her biographers. (Chopra 1985:721-723)

### Purpose

The underlying purpose of the study is to trace and assess the multifaceted contributions of Kamaladevi to multiple fields in historical perspective. As she was a versatile woman and remained active throughout of her career, she played an important role not only in national movement but also in other fields during colonial and post colonial India. She was a great woman of versatile personality and the study is aimed at focusing on her marvelous performances in national and international fields.

### Methodology

The study has derived its source materials from authored and edited books as well as from various articles, essays etc. published in journals and newspapers. Google scholars' contributions also provided in depth focus on multidimensional activities of Kamaladevi to trace and highlight her versatility and rebel character.

## Literature Review

Most of works on the History of Modern India and Freedom Struggle do not discuss and assess the multidimensional performances of Kamaladevi. The Books authored by S.R.Sharma (1951),N.S. Bose(1963) Percival Spear (1970,1978),Anil Chandra Banerjee (1992), Dhanpati Pandey(2016), Ishwari Prasad (2016), Sumit Sarkar (1986),S.C. Ghosh(1991), Sekhar Bandopadhyay (2004,2004), B.L.Grover and Yashpal (2005), Bipan Chandra (2009), Ramlakhan Shukla(2013), Ishita Banerjee-Dube (2015),Sailendra Nath Sen (2017) etc. ,the life and works Kamaladevi are not mentioned. The Books on Social History of India and Indian Women Through the Ages, Women in Indian History etc. by K.K.Datta(1975).P.Padmanabhan and Dinesh Narayan Verma(2013),Dinesh Narayan Verma (2014), Suranjan Chatterjee and Siddhartha Guha Ray (2015) etc. overlooked the unstinted contributions of Kamaladevi. In a recently published book “Bhartiya Sanskriti mein Nari” edited by Prof.Ishwar Sharan Visvakarma (2018,Prakashan Vibhag,Akhil Bhartiya Itihas Sankalan Yojna,New Delhi),there are few lines about Kamaladevi(p-542).

### Early Phase of the Life of Kamaladevi: Education, Marriage, Childhood and Theater

On April 3, 1903, Kamaladevi, the fourth and youngest of her parents’ daughters, was born in Mangaluru, Karnataka, (Chopra1985:721)into a Saraswat Brahmin home. (The Indian Express, 2018, April 3) Her father, Ananthayya Dhareshwar, was the Mangalore district collector, and her mother, Girijabai, came from a coastal Karnataka land-owning Saraswat Brahmin family. Even though Girijabai learned the majority of her education at home, she was also well-educated, and Kamaladevi’s paternal grandmother was familiar with the Puranas and ancient Indian epics. Collectively, these provided Kamaladevi with a strong basis and established expectations for her voice and intelligence, two traits for which she eventually gained notoriety.

Kamaladevi completed her elementary education at the nearby St. Ann’s Convent. Her upbringing in an area with a diverse cultural background gave her an affinity for traditional arts, especially Yakshagana music and dance.(Jyothi, 2020) She also became very interested in Koodiyattam, an ancient play form from Kerala, after learning about it from none other than “Natyacharya” Padma Shri Mani Madhava Chakyar. (Bhargava, 2007) After her father passed away suddenly, Kamaladevi was raised at her maternal uncle’s house and interacted with prominent independence campaigners such as Annie Besant, Gopalkrishna Gokhale, and Srinivas Shastri. This influenced her life going forward.

As was usual at the time, Kamaladevi was married at the juvenile age of 14, and she lost her husband after just two years. She chose to pursue higher studies at Queen Mary’s College in Madras, despite the tragedy. There, she met Harindranath Chattopadhyay, the brother of Sarojini Naidu, who was already well-known as a playwright, actress, and poet. The relationship ended with marriage. (Chopra1985:721) Just as the affair had been uncommon, widow remarriage was uncommon in the early 1920s. The pair performed plays and skits throughout India. They made it as far north as the Himalayas and as far south as the Malabar Coast.

Kamaladevi’s passion for theatre aided in her employment in the motion picture business. She acted in several Hindi films, including Tansen (1943), Shankar Parvati (1943), and Dhanna Bhagat (1945) as well as the silent Kannada film Mricchakatika (1931). (India Today, 2018).

Kamaladevi relocated to London to live with her husband Harindranath around this time. She enrolled there at the renowned Bedford College of the University of London, where she earned a diploma in Sociology after graduating. Her practical experience in London enabled her to dedicate herself to M.K. Gandhi’s work upon her return to India. Her time

spent away from home signals Kamaladevi's rise to prominence as a liberation warrior and social reformer.

### **Role in the Freedom Struggle**

While still residing in London in 1923, Kamaladevi became aware of Mahatma Gandhi's Non-Cooperation Movement. She quickly departed for India to become a member of Seva Dal, a Gandhian group committed to promoting social justice. She was tasked with enlisting, coordinating, and preparing women and girls of all ages to work at Seva Dal as Sevikas

In 1927, Kamaladevi achieved an unprecedented feat. In the Madras Provincial Legislative Assembly elections, she became the first Indian woman to contest for public office. She was inspired by a chat she had with the founder of the All India Women's Conference (AIWC), suffragette Margaret E. Cousins. Because of the patriarchal views of the day, Kamaladevi's campaign was a failure, and she lost by a mere 55 votes. Seeing her fierce campaign in the province elections, Kamaladevi was named AIWC Secretary that same year. Following her membership of the Indian National Congress, she was elected to the All India Congress Committee in 1928. Throughout her tenure at AIWC, Kamaladevi worked very hard to improve women's standing and achieve social changes. She was among the original founders of the prestigious Lady Irwin College, which provided Home Sciences courses when it was established in New Delhi in 1932. (Kumar, 1997)

In fact, Kamaladevi worked in the field of education and also attempted to push for legislative improvements. Throughout the 1930s, she travelled extensively, beginning in Germany. Under her chairmanship, the Youth Conference in 1929 passed a resolution in favour of complete independence for India. (Chopra 1985:722) In 1929, she was the only delegate from India to the International Alliance of Women, which was headquartered in Berlin. (Lal, 2018) It was at this point that she understood how ethnic and geographic differences could keep women

from uniting. At the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom convention in Prague, she was informed about Jane Addams' and the Hull House's initiatives. When she went to the worldwide meeting of the League against Imperialism in Frankfurt, she found a platform for discussing the problems that oppressed people confront.

Kamaladevi went through the single biggest life changing moment in March 1930. The nation was getting ready for the Salt Satyagraha, led by Gandhi. Protests were staged all over India, and laws that discriminated against people were broken. However, Kamaladevi was troubled by the seeming absence of women from the freedom cause. At the Ras (village panchayat), she went up to Gandhi and asked him to allow women to participate in the protest. But Gandhi disapproved of her theories. To him, it was unthinkable to ask women to break the law and end up behind bars. Unfazed by Babu's worries, Kamaladevi became the first woman to be imprisoned when she called on the ladies to join the Salt Satyagraha in a determined act of disobedience. (Pande 2011:219) Meanwhile, in another act of sheer bravery, she went to the Bombay stock exchange and put up for auction a packet of salt that she had created by breaching the laws governing salt. The auction brought in 501 rupees.

The colonial authorities banned the Indian National Congress and Seva Dal soon after the civil disobedience movement. Kamaladevi was one among the senior Congress party officials taken into custody. When she was a prisoner, she was affected by the appalling living conditions of prisoners. It was the time when poor hygiene was the norm. Hunger and illness were commonplace. She had become jaundiced as well. It was a horrible situation. Building a hospital for prisoners was Kamaladevi's first action after being set free. (Fernandes, 2019)

Kamaladevi's experiences in prison served as inspiration. She pledged to support the liberation of

factory workers and peasants. She was drawn to socialism because of its emphasis on equality and justice. In the first annual session of the Congress Socialist Party held at Bombay on 21-22 Oct. 1934, she was elected as one of its executive members. (Pande 2011:226) She served as Jayaprakash Narayan's and Ram Manohar Lohia's co-workers before winning the 1936 Congress Socialist Party presidency. She visited Bangalore several times and addressed a political meeting there. (Pande 2011:278-279) In 1944, she was chosen President of the All India Women's Conference. (Chopra 1985:722)

Kamaladevi embarked on a world tour as soon as the Second World War (1939-1945) broke out in order to draw attention to India's predicament and mobilise support for the country's independence following the conflict. She visited China, the United States, Latin America, and Europe in order to expose the British Empire. (Chopra 1985:722-723) As a woman of colour, she faced racism in America and established a direct line of communication between Gandhi and Martin Luther King. Orders were issued to stop her from visiting India after the colonial authorities learned of her actions in the US. After the country attained independence in August 1947, Kamaladevi eventually assumed a new position: nation-building.

### **Role in Nation-building**

Upon her arrival in India, Kamaladevi was extended an opportunity by the Nehru administration to join the cabinet. However, she made the decision to assist the refugees who were fleeing the North West Frontier Province rather than take a position in the administration. Her initial assignment was to organize the Indian cooperative union to aid in rehabilitation; she also planned a township on cooperative lines through the organization. After considerable wrangling, Mahatma Gandhi finally granted her permission—so long as she promised not to request government aid—and the township of Faridabad—on the outskirts of Delhi—was established, housing more than 50,000

Northwest Frontier refugees. (IGNCA, 2007) She devoted her life to help the refugees create new lives and careers by providing them with training in new skills. She also assisted in the establishment of medical facilities in the new community.

Disappointed with the Nehru government's expanding industrial aspirations in the 1950s, Kamaladevi was concerned that the developments had a terrible impact on traditional artisans employed in unorganized sectors. She began establishing the All India Handicrafts Board and a network of Cottage Industries Emporia in 1952. She also established the Crafts Council of India in 1964 and the Crafts Museum (now known as the National Handicrafts and Handlooms Museum) in 1956. (IGNCA: 2007; Chopra 1985:723)

In order to revive the glorious history of drama and theatre, Kamaladevi played a key role in the establishment of the National Institution of Drama in 1959, which was run under the auspices of Sangeet Natak Akademi. The institution eventually became autonomous in 1975. (Gopalakrishnan, 2004)

Her literary contributions gave her life a new dimension. Across a wide range of subjects, including history, colonialism, tribes, handicrafts, feminism, and even global politics, Kamaladevi is the author of eighteen books. For instance: she demonstrated her understanding of Vietnam's colonial history in 'The Struggle of Vietnam against French Imperialism.' On the other hand, 'At the Crossroads' issues a cautionary note regarding Japan's forceful attempts to assert itself across Asia.

Kamaladevi, a laureate of the UNESCO Award, the Ramon Magsaysay Award, the Padma Bhushan, and the Padma Vibhushan was a pioneer in multiple fields. She was probably the most influential Indian woman of the 20th century. In Gandhi's vision of freedom and equality for women, she proved to be one of the ablest woman leaders. (Pande 2011:393) Her struggles must go down in the annals of history and her successes must be cherished in our hearts. When she

passed away on October 29, 1988, the then President R. Venkataraman grievously stated, “It is difficult to prefix the word ‘late’ to Kamaladevi’s name, because hers was, and will be a palpable presence.”

### Conclusion:

Thus it is obvious that Kamaladevi is remembered for her contributions to the freedom struggle and also for being the driving force behind the renaissance of Indian handicrafts, hand looms and theatre in independent India as well as for upliftment of the socio-economic standard of Indian Women by pioneering co-operation. For her activism across many borders, she was awarded Padma Bhushan (1955), Raman Magsaysay Award (1966), the Sangeet Natak Academy Fellowship (1974) UNESCO Award (1977), Padma Vibhushan (1987) and also honoured by Shantiniketan.

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