

# Women and Politics in India: A Critique of Political Career of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay(1903-1988)

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## *ABSTRACT*

This paper traces and examines the political career of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (1903-1988) in colonial and post colonial India. Though as a pioneer of Indian feminist and ardent nationalist her political career faced many ups and downs, but she never deviated from her political actions and following aims of her political career. As a result of this attitude, she acted strongly and at first actively participated in political movement against British Colonialism in India and after gaining of independence she struggled hard for the cause of society and nation. This was the biggest achievement of her political career in India. The paper also throws light on her political activities that influenced the political movements against colonialism and for making of society and nation in India. She was gifted with multifaceted talents that she displayed times and again on various occasions but this paper outlines her political career and unfolds its multiple aspects so far not properly discussed and assessed in national scenario.

**Keywords: COlonial, Political Career, Freedom Movement, Society, Nation.**

## **Introduction**

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay was one of top woman leaders of before and after independence of India. She was ever mentioned with contemporary Annie Beasnt (1847-1933) and Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949). From her young age, she was imbued with revolutionary ideas. She was a rebel (Chopra 1985:721-723) and dared customs and traditions and remarried after being widowed. (Srivastava 1997:28).

Her political career was greatly influenced by the writings of Lokmanya Tilak and meetings with contemporary famous feminists like Annie Beasant, Pandita Ramabai, Ramabai Ranade and Sarojini Naidu. 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.

She actively participated in various phases of freedom struggle, her involvement became significant in the Civil Disobedience Movement (1930-1934) and in the Quit India Movement (1942-1943), and even after independence, she remained active and made contributions to the development of society and nation for more than four decade. In this regard, Kamaladevi was unmatched and left an indelible mark of her long political career on various fields. Therefore, the years 1927, 1928, 1929, 1930, 1944, 1955, 1959, 1966, 1974 and 1987 marked a new phase of her long political career in India before and after independence.

## **Purpose of the Study:**

The main purpose of the study is to explore and examine the political career of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay in colonial and post colonial India. She was a woman of versatile trait and remained

active throughout of her political career. She played an important role in successive phases of freedom struggle. Even after gaining of independence, she remained politically active and made unstinted contributions to the making of contemporary society and nation in India. She was gifted with multifaceted talent and made contributions to various fields, however, this study is specially focused on her political career in colonial and independent India.

### **Methodology:**

The study is mainly based on source materials from authored and edited books with various articles, essays etc. published in journals and newspapers. Google scholars' contributions also provided in depth focus on her political career in India before and after independence. These source materials are observed as before and after independence with a view to focus on the political career of Kamaladevi during 1921-1947 and 1947-1988.

### **Literature Review:**

The political career of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay is an overlooked aspect as most of works on the History of Modern India and Freedom Struggle do not deal and examine her political career. 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 political career and its highlights of 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 political career 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, p-542), Women in

Indian Society by Neera Desai and Usha Thakkar (2001, National Book Trust), Bhartiya Itihas mein Nari by Professor Sugam Anand (2010, Sahitya Sangam, Allahabad, p-118), Bhartiya Nari-Sangharsh aur Mukti by Brinda Karat (2008, Granth Shilpi, Delhi, p-23), Bhartiya Itihas mein Mahilayein by M.P.Tyagi & R.K.Rastogi (First edition, Sanjeev Prakashan, Meerut, pp 160, 163), Bhartiya Itihas mein Nari by D.K.Sharan (2007, Classical Publishing House, New Delhi, pp 27-28), Bhartiya Itihas mein Mahilayein by K.L.Khurana & S.S.Chauhan (2012, Laxmi Narayan Agrawal, Agra, p-118), there are few lines about the political career of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay. The present study unfolds the bright political career and its various aspects of Kamaladevi who is ever mentioned with contemporary great woman personalities like Annie Besant (1847-1933) and Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949).

### **First Phase of Political Career of Kamaladevi 1921-1947 :**

The first phase of political career of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (1903-1988) started when she became a member of the Congress Party and joined Non-Cooperation Movement in 1921. She joined a Gandhian Group called Seva Dal committed, a turning point in her life (Nayar & Mankekar 2005:239) to promoting social justice and harmony. She was entrusted with the responsibility of enlisting, coordinating as well as preparing women and girls as Sevika of Seva Dal. In 1926, she was the first woman to stand for election in Mangalore (Madras Provincial Legislative Assembly elections), the then native state. Though she lost by a mere 55 votes but it could not affect her promising political career. She got inspiration from a chat that she had with the founder of AIWC Margaret E.Cousins. After this, Kamaladevi became one of the founder members of the All India Women's Conference (A.I.W.C.) in 1926. However, her fierce campaign during the provincial elections proved to be a significant phase of her political career as she was named as AIWC Secretary in 1926. As AIWC Secretary, Kamaladevi worked hard for social change specially for women upliftment. As its most

active secretary, she tried hard and set up its branches all over India. As a founder-member, and later its President and Patron, she played a major role in shaping AIWC's basic structure, policies and programmes. (Nayar & Mankekar 2005:238) Three years later in 1929, she represented the A.I.W.C. at the International Congress of the Women's League for Peace and Freedom in Prague. Next year in 1930, she resigned from the A.I.W.C. to become a full-time activist of the Civil Disobedience Movement and was responsible for planning the raid on the salt fields in the precincts of Bombay city. A noted author Radha Kumar mentioned that "...it fell to me to plan it, but unlike Dharasana, where only a small group was entrusted with the task of the raid, here I visualized a mass raid embarrassing a large part of the city's two million population. I was sure that no force, not even machine-guns could stop the raid. On the eve of the raid I was arrested but my parting message to my colleagues and the vast populace was to execute this plan. I was represented by my son of seven who proudly carried the banner and engaged in the drama of his first battle." (Kumar 1997:55) At her trial Kamaladevi tried to sell salt (the "Freedom Salt"), in the courtroom and asked the Magistrate to resign his position and join the struggle i.e. Satyagraha. (Sharan 2007:27-28). She was awarded a nine months' prison term and a fine of Rs.170. Rajani Alexander observed,

The zeal and audacity in the 1930 civil disobedience were virtually unparalleled. Truly, it was individuals such as Kamaladevi who shed all encumbrances to go out and boldly do their duty for the nation that ensured that Gandhiji's civil disobedience campaign would be a tremendous success." (Chopra 1985:722) When she was released in 1931, she was put in charge of organizing the women's wing of the Hindustani Seva Dal, an agitational Nationalist organization, started in 1924. In 1929 under her chairmanship the Youth Congress passed a resolution in favour of complete independence for India. (Chopra 1985:722). Moreover, she was the only delegate from India to the International Alliance of Women (IAW) in 1929. She played a key role in founding Lady Irwin College

in New Delhi in 1932. (Kumar 1997:68-69). In fact throughout 1930s she travelled extensively India and abroad. She met Gandhi and requested him to allow women to participate in the Movement but Gandhi disapproved it. But Gandhi's refusal could not dampen the spirit of Kamaladevi. She became the first woman to be imprisoned when she called on ladies to join the Salt Satyagraha in a determined act of disobedience. (Pande 2011:219). In 1932, she was arrested again and sentenced to one year's imprisonment. She badly suffered from unhygienic conditions of jail and came to know the pitiable conditions of the prisoners. So after her release she launched a campaign for building a hospital for prisoners (Fernandes, 2019). During this period she became a socialist as its principles of equality and justice attracted her mostly. In 1934, she joined the Congress Socialist Party. 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). She presided over its first All India Conference in Meerut in 1935. During the Quit India Movement of 1942, she was arrested and imprisoned in Bangalore.

During the Second World War (1939-1945) she embarked on a world tour in order to draw attention of European countries to India's predicament and mobilize their support for India's independence. In April 1944, she was chosen President of the All India Women's Conference. (Chopra 1985:722) convened in Bombay. According to Rajani Alexander, "The organization clearly wanted to honour this fervent patriot. In the 1930s and 1940s Kamaladevi was a restless soul; she had held office in the Congress Socialist Party and also been a member of the All India Congress Committee and Congress Working Committee, constantly searching for ways to work for the nation's good. She has declared that her basic credo is one voiced by Gandhiji: I have privilege and

monopoly. She has strived endlessly for the service of the weakest sections of society. She has received many honours and held varied positions, but she refused to accept political office in free India.” (Chopra 1985: 722). Perhaps this was one of her greatest achievements of the first phase of her political career as she resolved to work with selfless devotion for social and national development.

### **Final Phase of Political Career of Kamaladevi 1947-1988**

The second phase of her political career began with independence of India and it was no less important than before as she remained active in society and nation building for the next more than four decades. She remained politically active and actively worked for labours, artisans, craftsmen, refugees and others. This was a proud act done by a woman in independent India and proved another marvellous phase of her long political career. She not only refused to join Nehru cabinet but also decided to help the refugees who were fleeing North West Frontier Province. She organized the Indian Cooperative Union with the sole purpose of assisting rehabilitation and successfully planned a co-operative township through the organization. She got the permission of Nehru government on the condition not to request for official aid and on the outskirts of Delhi the township of Faridabad was established. More than 50,000 Northwest Frontier refugees were rehabilitated and Kamaladevi devoted her life to help and assist them in various ways. She also established All India Handicrafts Board, a network of Cottage Industries Emporia in 1952, the Crafts Council of India in 1964, the Crafts Museum (now known as the National Handicrafts and Handlooms Museum) in 1956. (Chopra 1985:723). These establishments were most significant works of the final phase of political career of Kamaladevi. Undoubtedly she remained active in her final phase of political career but she also took much interest in cultural activities—“one of the greatest protagonists of art in the country”—(Nayar & Mankekar 2005:234-235) and made significant literary contributions as

she wrote not less than eighteen books on history, colonialism, tribes, handicrafts, feminism and global politics. It is significant to note that one biographer of Kamaladevi characterized her as a “rebel.” Rajani Alexander pointed out that “She was one in the sense that she always rose up against injustice especially against wrongs done to those who were disadvantaged in society, be it women, the poor or any other group. However, she not only protested but also worked constructively to redress grievances. This is the central fact of Kamaladevi’s life that we must learn from, if we are to be responsible citizens of our country. It is not enough to protest wrongs, one must be ready to work hard, and continuously to better these wrongs and society in general.

Kamaladevi’s motivation in this regard has remained constant from the days she was a political fledgling with the All India Women’s Conference right through her many faceted-concerns and occupations to the present.” (Chopra 1985:723). Santosh Mahendrajit Singh who had met Kamaladevi, had good discussion on various issues and had described her characteristic traits. He observed that with her “...great achievements...Kamaladevi had enriched the country’s national and cultural heritage. A dauntless fighter for social equality, she was the first Indian woman to stand for open political election in the mid-twenties....she had secured for her countrywomen, at age 23, equal citizenship rights in a society that had been reluctant to concede even the bare rights for women to vote....She was the “supreme romantic heroine” of Gandhiji’s salt satyagraha movement, and was the first woman in Bombay Presidency to be arrested for breaking the salt laws. Sentenced four times, she spent a total five years in jail. Her role in creating national consciousness in Indian States then allied to the British Government, her efforts to shape public opinion in the USA during World War II, and her war-time experiences in China and Japan are a saga of courage and patriotism in the history of India’s national movement.” (Nayar & Mankekar 2005: 238-239).



## Conclusion:

Is it thus obvious that Kamaladevi 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. (Pande2011:393) 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" and observed, "She was the music of our handlooms and the hum of the potter's wheels. She was the fragrance of our culture." (Nayar & Mankekar 2005:240) A laureate of the UNESCO Award (1977), the Padma Bhushan (1955), the Ramon Magsaysay Award (1966) for Community Leadership, the Padma Vibhushan (1987) and also honoured by Shantiniketan (Visva Bharati, West Bengal) with the Desikottama, its highest award. She was a pioneer in multiple fields and left indelible mark of her political career and its marvellous achievements. It may be concluded that her life was an inspiring testimony to how individuals can serve the country not only through political life, but through many other channels as well." (Chopra 1985:721)

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