

## Contribution of educated elite women from urban landscape in the national movement and nation building: A case study of Kamladevi Chattopadhyay

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**Abstract:** Kamladevi Chattopadhyay donned many caps in her illustrious career. She was a fierce feminist who worked for the upliftment of the socio-economic status of women in the early twentieth century. She was the first woman in the pre-independence era to contest an election which though she lost yet, paved the way for the entry of women into the political arena. She was a part of the team led by Gandhiji in the famous 'Dandi March' in 1930. She was also appointed to the Congress Working Committee twice in her political career and was a founding member of the Congress Socialist Party. Post Partition, Kamladevi quit active politics and dedicated herself to the resettlement of Afghan refugees from NWFP in present-day Faridabad. She founded many national institutions to help revive the cottage and handloom industry and theatre in India as well as cooperatives to help uplift women, refugees, weavers, craftsmen and potters such as the Central Cottage Industries Emporium, Crafts Council of India, World Crafts Council, Indian Cooperative Union, National School of Drama, Sangeet Natak Academy and the India International Centre.

**Keywords:** Feminist, freedom fighter, post-partition, refugee settlement, cottage and handloom industry, theatre, cooperatives.

**Objective:** Present paper aims to examine the role played by Kamladevi Chattopadhyay in the Indian Freedom Struggle and nation-building post-partition.

**Research Methodology:** The researcher has adopted the doctrinal method of research. The paper is based on secondary sources, which include biographies, books, research papers, newspaper articles and internet sources, as literature on Kamladevi Chattopadhyay's life and career is surprisingly scarce. She maintained no correspondence or private documents, avoided interviews and was a distant figure in her son's life, so her biographers had to rely mainly on anecdotes and interview material.

### **Introduction:**

**Early Life:** Born into a Brahmin Family in Mangalore on April 3, 1903, Kamladevi was greatly influenced by her grandmother and mother, whose indomitable spirit, love of knowledge and strength of character helped mould her personality. Her mother, Girjabai, got Kamla enrolled in a school instead of home-schooling girls, which was prevalent in those times. Kamladevi's father was also progressive but unfortunately died early, and the family faced tough times. Under these circumstances, Kamladevi was married when she was only eleven years old. As fate would have it, Kamladevi's husband died within a year of their marriage. As Kamladevi continued to stay at her parent's house, her mother ensured her continued schooling and also protected Kamladevi from the barbaric customs that child widows suffered from. Even her husband's family supported her. The early deaths of her two married sisters, who their husbands ill-treated, left a scar on Kamladevi's psyche. Girjabai established Mahila Samaj in 1910 in Mangalore with a library and a badminton court where Kamladevi learnt to play badminton. Girjabai started grooming her daughter Kamladevi for active participation in the socio-political and national movements. She took Kamladevi when she was ten years old to meet Annie Besant, the first woman President of the Congress and asked her to bless Kamladevi. She very early realized the value of education and independence of women and was greatly inspired by her mother. Kamladevi was also significantly inclined towards music and culture from childhood because of her mother.

Kamladevi's maternal uncle, a renowned lawyer and social activist, nurtured her after her father's death. Through him, Kamladevi met several prominent figures like Gokhale, Sir Tej Bahadur Sapru, Justice Ranade and his wife Ramabai, which greatly influenced her outlook. Kamladevi's mother shifted to Madras, a bustling metropolis, for her elder daughter's treatment and to help Kamladevi, her younger daughter who had become a widow in childhood, escape the conservative brahmin community of

Mangalore. Kamladevi joined college, where she met Sarojini Naidu's sisters and Harindranath Chattopadhyay, her future husband, a fine poet and a play writer. Girjadevi, Kamladevi's mother, approved of the alliance as she thought it would help break the taboo surrounding the widow remarriage and that the unconventional and liberal Chattopadhyay family would help nurture Kamladevi's involvement in the socio-political reform movements.

Kamladevi and Harindranath got married in 1919; theirs was the country's first registered civil marriage. After marriage, Harindranath left for England to study at Cambridge. Kamladevi, too joined him in 1921 to pursue higher studies. She joined Bedford College in London to pursue a diploma in Sociology with field work as she realized she wanted to serve society. Meeting with Gandhiji in 1919 back in India influenced her decision and shaped her future as she pledged to devote her life to the satyagraha movement. Harindranath lost interest in academics and joined Kamladevi in London. After travelling extensively in Europe, where they also met Virendranath Chattopadhyay, elder brother of Harindranath in Berlin, who had become a member of a revolutionary group, they returned to India in 1922. Virendranath greatly influenced Kamladevi, and her political horizon widened extensively. Kamladevi and Harindranath set up a theatre group and began to tour India. In 1923 the couple were blessed with a son Ramakrishna.

**Kamladevi's Foray into Politics:** In 1924, Kamladevi worked as a volunteer at the Congress session in Belgaum, which changed the course of her life. Kamladevi's stormy marriage with Harindranath made her plunge deeper into the freedom movement. She was also greatly influenced by Mrs Margaret Cousins, the Irish theosophist feminist who was the Principal of National Girls' High School, Mangalore. Margaret inspired Kamladevi to fight for the Madras Legislative Council's elections, thus becoming the first woman to contest elections in pre-independent India. Though she lost the elections by a narrow margin, Kamladevi, with Mrs Margaret's help, became the General Secretary of the All India Women's Educational Conference, which played a significant role in the lives of the women who participated in the National Movement. Kamladevi started touring the country and addressing the public about the need to give equal status to women in society and campaigned for the Central Legislative Assembly to pass legislation like Child Marriage Restraint and the Age of Consent Bill. AIWC also campaigned for women's right to property and children's guardianship under the leadership of Kamladevi.

**Kamladevi's contribution to National Movement:** Kamladevi became a member of the Congress party in 1927, and a year after, due to her hard work and organizational capabilities elected to the All India Congress Committee. In 1929, Kamladevi was elected President of the Youth Congress Session in Ahmedabad, where she pressed upon the leadership to give a call for complete Swaraj. However, Kamladevi could not attend the historic Lahore Session of the Congress due to her son's illness, where a resolution for Poorna Swaraj was passed. The Congress Party appointed Kamladevi, the head of the Women's Committee of the Seva Dal, in absentia.

Gandhiji gave a clarion call for Civil Disobedience Movement starting with Dandi March in 1930, which roused the entire nation. Initially, Gandhiji was against women's participation in Dandi March but had to give in to Kamladevi's request. She was a part of the seven-member lead team in the famous salt satyagraha; the only other woman volunteer was Avantikabai Gokhale. Kamladevi resigned as the Secretary of the Women's Conference and devoted herself entirely to the cause of the Civil Disobedience Movement. She was arrested like other satyagrahis for breaking the salt law and spent one year in prison with Sarojini Naidu, her sister-in-law. In 1931, Sardar Patel, the then President of the Congress, entrusted Kamladevi with training Sevikas for Seva Dal, for which a training centre was set up at Borivli, and it got an overwhelming response from women. The orange brigade, as the Sevikas were called, successfully carried out picketing of the liquor shops that caused a loss of revenue to the Government. The Government banned Seva Dal, closed down the training centre at Borivli in 1932 and arrested Kamladevi. She was sent to Arthur Road jail, where she met Mira Behn, a close disciple of Gandhiji. Kamladevi was then transferred to Belgaum jail along with other sevikas, where she fell seriously ill, only to be arrested again shortly after her release. This time Kamladevi was sent to solitary confinement in Vellore jail for a year. This was a very trying period for Kamladevi as she legally separated from Harindranath in 1933.

After getting released from jail, Kamladevi became a member of the Congress Socialist Party, as a part of the Congress and began to work at the grassroots level in Mangalore, her home town. She was instrumental in organizing a successful strike of women workers of cashew-nut factories, thus demonstrating the need to incorporate economic-political struggle as an essential part of the national freedom movement. In 1936 when Jawaharlal Nehru became the Congress President, he inducted three members of the Socialist Party, Jaiprakash Narain, Achyut Patwardhan and Acharya Narendra Dev, into the Congress Working Committee and decided to broaden the base of the party, which was successfully carried out by the youth brigade of the Socialist Group that led to some friction between the old guard and the younger group. Gandhiji had mixed feelings towards Kamladevi. He had been wary of her boldness and independent spirit though he did appreciate her great organizational ability. The chasm widened further with Subhash Chandra Bose's election as the Congress Party's President. In the Tripura session in 1938, an ideological clash between Bose and Gandhiji led to the en masse resignation of CWC, except for Nehru.

Kamladevi stayed away from active politics after this development for two years, from 1939 to 1941, when she visited the USA, Japan and China with her son, Rama. The British prevented her from landing in Hong Kong, but she managed to land there and met Sun Yat Sen there. She became a celebrity in Japan and interacted with many people from all walks of life during her stay abroad.

Kamladevi attended the meeting of the All India Women's Conference meeting after a long hiatus and set up a camp in Gujarat to train women for their foray into politics. On her return, she found that the Congress Socialist Party had split, and many trade unions and student organizations had drifted towards the communists. On August 8, Gandhiji launched Quit India Movement. Regarding Gandhiji, Kamladevi wrote, 'For the first time there crept into his voice fire and bitterness as he said to the nation: 'this is open rebellion'. The brutal British crackdown to corner each Congress leader led to Kamladevi's arrest too. She was again sent to Vellore jail, where she fell ill and was released in early 1944. Post-release, she began to reorganize Socialist Party. A series of developments, including the Red Fort Trials of arrested Bose's Azad Hind Fauj officers and the Mutiny of the Indian Navy in Bombay, deeply stirred Kamladevi as the Chief Naval Officer and his close associates were her friends. Kamladevi's close colleague Amu Swaminathan's daughter, Captain Lakshmi Sehgal of Azad Hind Fauj, was also arrested. Pandit Nehru once again became the President of the Congress party, and he requested Kamladevi to join the Congress Working Committee. However, Kamladevi refused but accepted the offer at Dr Ram Manohar Lohia's insistence. In her autobiography, Kamladevi writes, 'I could not, however, but feel like the Socialist Party's sacrificial goat offered to stifle Pandit Nehru's discomfiture'. The Congress Socialist Party was against the country's partition and ultimately split with Congress on this issue. Kamladevi vehemently opposed the idea of partition and implored Gandhiji to stop it, but Gandhiji, who made a heart-breaking figure, said it was too late.

**Kamladevi's contribution to nation-building post-partition:** Kamladevi quit active politics and plunged into community development and refugee rehabilitation after the refugee crisis post-partition. As she would say later, "I left the highway of politics to step into the side lane of constructive work". She founded the Indian Cooperative Union, an organization that could take up the task of helping refugees who had lost their homes, land, and livelihoods come together to rebuild their lives. She devised a master plan for cooperation, for building a township, cooperative farming and thus generating income. Kamladevi took the blueprint to Gandhiji, who found the idea feasible, significantly boosting her morale. Despite the Delhi State Cooperative Department's indifferent attitude, Kamladevi got ICU registered after a fierce tussle of eight months, began work on Agricultural Cooperative, and with great difficulty got four hundred acres of land at Chattarpur. Soon there were half a dozen cooperative farms at work. Kamladevi, with a group of like-minded people, continued with the arduous task. Kamladevi came to know of a tent city of displaced Pathans from the North West Frontier, some 14 miles away from the main camp in Delhi, which was in tatters due to raging storms. She approached Dr Rajender Prasad, the President of India, who set up a special board he headed and launched the plan to build a township. That is how the plan for Faridabad came up. In a short period of three years, some 50,000 Pathans working together with the enthused support of Kamladevi built and operated their own powerhouse that generated some 6000 kwts of electricity, ran their own transport service, schools,

health centres, shops, bazaar etc. A fully equipped hospital named after Badsha Khan was constructed. Faridabad was seen as a model of development with its own railway station. The growing city was divided into many sectors, each to hold a self-contained community with full amenities. The Faridabad experiment was one of its kind in the country that demonstrated what the proper guidance and leadership could do.

Kamladevi's experimental farm at Chhattarpur was praised by Pandit Nehru when he visited it. Kamladevi realized it was necessary to initiate income-generating activities to help the inmates of various camps. Based on the survey carried out by volunteers to assess the skills of men and women of these camps, Kamladevi started craft activities and set up a Refugee Handicrafts Shop in Connaught Place, which later led to the setting up of the Central Cottage Industries Emporium. She organized an Industrial Arts and Crafts Exhibition with artisans from all over India to eliminate exploitative moneylenders and intermediaries.

Kamladevi's interest in arts and crafts stemmed from her childhood, and she was also aware that artisans and craftsmen were the most underprivileged and impoverished. Gandhiji's work for the indigo peasants of Champaran inspired Kamladevi to enter politics. She understood how Gandhiji's use of Khadi was more than a political symbol of bringing people of diverse backgrounds together. In her autobiography 'Inner Recesses Outer Spaces -Memoirs, Kamladevi writes, "it was only after I met Gandhiji that I came to understand the deep relationship of handicrafts with our daily life". The All India Congress Sessions in the thirties had exhibitions of artisans, weavers and potters who came from many parts of the country to showcase their skills, and even the All India Women's Conference, of whom Kamladevi was the President, made it compulsory for their branches to carry out work in crafts to support women. Kamladevi's passion for handicrafts, her dynamism and her great ability to organize activities led Pandit Nehru to request her to head the Statutory Board of All India Handloom and Handicraft Board set up by the GOI in 1952. Kamladevi headed it for twenty years, and during this period, she travelled the country, studying the existing traditions of weaving, pottery, sculpture, metalwork, toy-making, jewellery making etc. She formed cooperatives to help market the products of artisans. She went to the country's remote corners to meet artisans, help them, and appreciate their craft. She was lovingly addressed as 'Hastkala Ma' by the craftsmen who saw her as their saviour. Kamladevi helped revive dying art and craft by organizing sales and exhibitions within the country and abroad to ensure a steady income for the artisans. Kamladevi opened Pilot project centres to revive old crafts, some of which had already died out. She also instituted the National Awards for Master Craftsmen. Kamladevi was almost solely responsible for the revival of the Indian crafts and helped elevate their status internationally. The World Crafts Council, an international organization affiliated with UNESCO with regional centres covering Asia, Africa, Europe, Latin America and North America, came into being due to the efforts of Kamladevi. As the Vice-President of the organization, she was responsible for creating its constitution and evolving the modus operandi.

Among the other institutions that Kamladevi helped create and nurture were the Indian National Theatre, the National School of Drama, Bhartiya Natya Sangha, the Sangeet Natak Academy, Lady Irwin College and the India International Centre. Recognizing her outstanding contribution, the Government of India conferred Kamladevi Padma Bhushan in 1955 and Padma Vibhushan in 1987. Besides, she was awarded Ramon Magsaysay Award in 1966 and the Sangeet Natak Akademi Fellowship, Ratna Sadasya, in recognition of her lifetime's work. UNESCO, too, honoured her with an award in 1977 for her extraordinary work in promoting handicrafts. Kamladevi was also a prolific writer and wrote 18 books about women's issues, her foreign visits and Indian handicrafts. Her acclaimed autobiography, *Inner Recesses and Outer Spaces: Memoir*, was published in 1986. Kamladevi left for the heavenly abode in 1988 in Bombay, aged 85, having lived an extraordinary life donning several caps while covering a broad spectrum of political, social and cultural life, thus embodying the essence of the making of Modern India. As Indian President R. Venkatraman said on her death, it is difficult to prefix the word 'late' to Kamladevi's name because "hers was, and will always be, a palpable presence."

**Conclusion:** Kamladevi played a unique role in India's freedom struggle. Post-independence, she left an indelible mark on the nation's psyche by reviving Indian handicrafts and nurturing several national institutions charged with promoting dance, drama, art, theatre, music and puppetry. She was also a





prominent figure in the international socialist feminist movement. From the late 1920s onwards, Kamladevi passionately advocated for women's equal rights. Her remarriage after widowhood and legal divorce from her second marriage was also regarded as a personal movement towards self-empowerment. During her lifetime, she donned many roles ranging from a freedom fighter, feminist, social activist, and theatre actor to an art enthusiast. In every field she ventured, she left an imprint that continues to impact the lives of millions in India and beyond. Kamladevi was ahead of her times and perhaps even by today's standards.

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