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Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and the Idea of the Global South

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay is renowned in India as a stalwart of the independence movement, an early champion of women's rights, and as the country's foremost authority on textiles, handicrafts, and theater arts. But what is perhaps most striking is how the idea of the 'Global South' is incipient in her life's work and writings. She was a staunch advocate of South-South links and was a keen observer of political developments in Asia, Africa, and among the subjugated and repressed populations of the Global North. Kamaladevi may be viewed as nearly singular with respect to how socialism, feminism, anti-colonial solidarity, and advocacy of the rights of marginalized people were conjoined in her work and worldview.

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (1903-88) occupies an unusual place in the annals of modern Indian history. She has long been recognized in India as the person chiefly responsible, after the attainment of independence



Fig. 1. Kamaladevi with a framed photograph of Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru in the background.

in 1947, for the revival of the country's extraordinarily variegated crafts traditions and for drawing critical attention to 'tribal art'. Kamaladevi was for decades viewed as the country's greatest authority on Indian textiles and handicrafts, and she traveled far and wide collecting specimens from around the country and

creating institutions which would nurture the talents of the country's indigenous artists and the almost wholly unrecognized craftsmen working without any expectation of reward or fame.¹ (Fig. 1) She also played a critical role in shaping the cultural institutions – among them, the Crafts Museum, the National School of Drama, the Sangeet Natak Akademi (National Performing Arts Academy), and the Theatre Crafts Museum, all in Delhi – that in independent India would be charged with promoting dance, drama, theatre crafts, music, puppetry, pottery, and textiles.

Though there are some lettered Indians who do not recognize the name of Kamaladevi at all, and many others who know her only as the matron – some would say *czarina* – of Indian arts from the early 1950s to 1970s, another Kamaladevi emerges from the pages of her gusty memoir of 1984, *Inner Recesses Outer Spaces*. She was less than 12 years old when in early January 1915 Mohandas Gandhi, a one-time barrister who had made something of a name for himself as the author of the idea of *satyagraha*, or nonviolent resistance, and spokesperson for the rights of Indians in South Africa, returned to India for good. In her memoir, Kamaladevi writes about her early exposure to Indian politics at her maternal uncle's home, to which she moved when her father passed away in 1910.² Visitors to her uncle's home included many political luminaries and eminent social reformers who were practically household names in India, among them Gopalkrishna Gokhale and Srinivas Sastri, and sometime in her late teens she met Pandita Ramabai, an upper caste Indian woman who was unusually learned and was felicitated by traditional pandits for her scholarship and erudition. She would arouse controversy with her book, *The High Caste Hindu Woman*,³ and eventually went on to dazzle audiences in the United States, Britain, and Japan. "In my estimation", Kamaladevi was to write, "she is the greatest Indian woman of our time"⁴ and doubtless Pandita Ramabai was among those women whose impress upon Kamaladevi was such as to move her to embrace vigorously the cause of women. (Fig. 2)

The first plea on behalf of women emanated from Kamaladevi's pen in 1926 and three years later she had authored a paper on the "Status of Women in India"; before too long, she was established as perhaps the foremost advocate of women's equality in India.⁵ She was always sensitive to the condition of Indian women and, while forging solidarity with women's rights advocates in the US and Europe, remained an articulate exponent of the view that white women's feminism could account for neither all of the needs of Indian women nor for their histories. It is remarkable that, at

a time when women's movements in the West were largely focused on seeking a right for women to vote, acquire an education, and be treated as something more than as appendages to men, Kamaladevi was arguing for what today would be called 'equal pay for equal work' and for equality for women on the factory floor, in the workplace, and in the political sphere. She was, it may be said, both an advocate and a critic of white feminism and was prescient in advancing the idea that one had to think of multiple feminisms. It is no accident that she was also the first woman in India to stand for a public elected office: at the age of 23 she fought for a seat in the Madras Legislative Assembly, losing by less than 60 votes.

Though the pages of her memoir describe, then, her acquaintance from an early age with some of India's political leaders and her unstinting support for the rights of women, Kamaladevi was also quite forthright in stating that her political awakening commenced with the ascendancy of Gandhi on the national stage in 1920. She likens his arrival in her characteristically ornate language to a "new comet" that had "risen in our firmament which was to become the missile to strike at the 'invulnerable' British Empire and the world was to view the red sun set on its imperial frontiers."⁶ Gandhi's rise to political preeminence was all the more remarkable in that he was operating in an arena immensely rich in anti-colonial figures of fiery intellect and formidable political skills who had amassed considerable followings. However, as Kamaladevi points out, all that went before Gandhi – "bomb throwing, political assassinations, attempted violence", as well as the politics of petitioning and gentlemanly dissent – became quite obsolete. "To those of my generation", Kamaladevi states, "the real political history of India begins with the Gandhi era."⁷ For nearly two decades, from the time when Kamaladevi first became personally acquainted with Gandhi, until his



Leaflet from Kamaladevi's U.S. tour, 1941.
Image from Mary Van Kleeck Papers, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts.

Fig. 2. Leaflet from Kamaladevi's US tour, 1941. Courtesy: Mary Van Kleeck Papers, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts, USA.

assassination on 30 January 1948, he monopolized her imagination just as he held sway over the nation. To the end of her own life, Kamaladevi acknowledged Gandhi as someone who was a moral exemplar for anyone seeking to enter into politics. However, though she maintained enormous respect and affection for Gandhi she also displayed, whenever the occasion demanded, a gusty spirit of defiance to the Mahatma's pronouncements.

It is indisputably the case that Kamaladevi was a principal figure in the nationalist movement and was clearly destined for high office following independence. She would have been deserving of that honor in her capacity not merely, as some would like to believe, as a prominent woman in a sea of men and as a close associate of Gandhi and Nehru. (Fig 3) She was also a member of the Congress Working Committee, the supreme decision-making body of the country's principal organ of nationalist opinion, as an architect of the women's movement in India, and as an activist of the anti-colonial struggle with a real appreciation of the idea of political theatre. The most widely circulated photograph of Kamaladevi shows her at the head of a procession in 1930 during what became known as the "Flag Satyagraha": as she marches with the flag of the Congress party, others behind her hold a banner which reads, "Up with the National Flag, Down with the Union Jack." (Fig. 4) In a scuffle with British troops over the outlawed Congress flag, she hung on



Fig. 3. Crown Prince Akihito and Princess Michiko (on the left), on a state visit to India in November 1960, with Kamaladevi and, to her left, Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru and (extreme left) Joseph Allen Stein, architect of the India International Centre, Delhi. Copyright: India International Centre, New Delhi.

to it tenaciously: she became, not just for that moment but for some time to come, the nation's feisty daughter. Kamaladevi nevertheless did not achieve high office: the partition of India pained her, she felt disillusioned, and the assassination of Gandhi less than six months after independence hastened her decision to disavow the political life and in particular public office.

To these more or less familiar trajectories of Kamaladevi's life we must add another critical dimension. Though the term 'Global South', which of late has become somewhat hip, is nowhere to be found in her writings, it is doubtless incipient in her work; indeed, I would go so far as to say that she was among the earliest exponents



Fig. 4. In what is perhaps the most famous photograph of Kamaladevi, she is here shown leading a flag procession (1930) during the height of the nationalist movement.

had a more expansive conception of it than any of her contemporaries or even those who have elaborated upon the idea in recent years. In the aftermath of Japan's military triumph over Russia in 1905, an event heralded by nationalists in much of Asia as the awakening of great continent, pan-Asianism became an attractive proposition for intellectuals in countries such as Japan, India, and Vietnam.⁸ The history of black internationalism is often traced to figures such as Frantz Fanon and Patrice Lumumba, or more broadly to decolonization movements in Africa that began to acquire urgency in the 1950s after the example of successful anti-colonial struggles in the Indian subcontinent and Indonesia, but it is instructive to recall that W. E. B. DuBois founded *The Crisis*, subtitled a "Record of the Darker Races", in 1910 as the official organ of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored Peoples and that almost from the outset he took it as his charge to advocate for the rights not only of African Americans but of colored people around the world and in particular Africa. It is in this context that one can begin to see how Kamaladevi, building on the ideologies of pan-Asianism and black internationalism, and moved by both the women's movements in Europe and the US as well as the promise of freedom from class oppression in the wake of the Great October revolution and the rapid advance of Bolshevism around the world, would in time begin to articulate the notion of a global South.

Kamaladevi's international travels, through which she wove a dense

network of alliances, commenced from around the late 1920s. She attended the “International Alliance of Women in Berlin” in 1929, only to become aware of how race and national boundaries might become obstacles to the solidarity of women: it was a “misnomer” to call it “International”, she says, as the only non-Western representatives were from Egypt and India, and the “other colonial countries were represented by *their* rulers and not the country’s nationals.”⁹ At the Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom meeting at Prague, Kamaladevi was brought to an awareness of the work of Jane Addams, the American feminist and pioneer social worker, and the institution associated with her name, Hull House.¹⁰ Similarly, at the International Session of the League against Imperialism in Frankfurt, Kamaladevi found a congenial platform for discussing problems encountered in common by subjugated peoples in West Africa, North Africa, Indochina, the American South, and elsewhere.¹¹

All of this transpired within the space of less than a year; and yet Kamaladevi continued to create such alliances and networks over the course of three long decades, forging friendships with socialists, feminists, internationalists, social reformers, and political radicals as much in Asia and Africa as in Europe and the United States. One might even say that she attempted a ‘reverse anthropology’, and her two books on the United States, *Uncle Sam’s Empire* (1944) and *America: The Land of Superlatives* (1946), set their gaze on a country that was emerging as the world’s superpower.¹² Her first lengthy sojourn in the US, from late 1939 to the early fall of 1941, offers a striking account of the country’s history, political institutions, and social practices: Kamaladevi was quite a celebrity, a recognized spokesperson for Indian national aspirations and an eloquent spokeswoman for women’s rights and social justice, and her patrons included Eleanor Roosevelt. However, Kamaladevi had political work to do: she visited prisons and American Indian reservations, and she met with labor union leaders. It is thus that she became aware of what she terms “freaks and anomalies in this New World”: she writes with surprise of the resistance to unions and “the fierce battles of labour to unionise”, and says of the American Indians of New Mexico that they had “been through the same kind of traumatic experience as ours, of being dispossessed, isolated, but a new era had dawned for them now, with the advent of the New Deal.”¹³ Her trip to the United States, Kamaladevi recognized, would be woefully incomplete without a visit to the American “deep South, where discrimination based

on colour was still almost like an article of faith.”¹⁴ She writes with empathy of communities that were subject to systematic discrimination and racism: the global South, she could see for herself, extended to parts of the global North. No solidarity of colored peoples, or of the colonized, could leave out African Americans or Native Americans.

I have furnished thus far only some hints, rather than a systematic and comprehensive account, of Kamaladevi’s travels, her support of anti-colonial movements not just in her native India but among colonized peoples throughout the world, and her ability to move around with ease in the various intersecting worlds of feminism, socialism, and third world internationalism. She also remained, to the end, firmly Indian – and it is to India that she rendered the greatest service, in the first phase of her life as a critical nationalist, and following partition as a proponent of an idea that India, having gained its independence under the leadership of Gandhi, had a moral obligation to abide by his principles and find its own path in a world where nations were cajoled into choosing between the United States and the Soviet Union. She facilitated India’s emergence as one of the leaders of the non-aligned movement and the crafting of the Bandung Declaration of 1956 which was nothing other than a clarion call for a fundamental reordering of the world order. But if her invisible hand, so to speak, can be discerned in India’s attempts to create a third space in the global arena of politics, she also brought a new awareness of the possibilities of dialogues within the global South that would not be mediated by the West. India and Southeast Asia had been linked together by various ties over centuries before their respective contacts with Europe. Not only Hinduism and Buddhism but even Islam traveled from India to Southeast Asia.¹⁵ Buddhism helped India forge links with China and Japan just as Islam enabled connections between West Asia and India.¹⁶ Gujarati traders were to be found for centuries in every port over the vast Indian Ocean trading system.¹⁷ One of the most deleterious consequences of colonialism was that, among colonized peoples, even the memories of their cultural, economic, and social exchanges with each other were eviscerated over a period of time. The West became the reference point for all intellectual exchanges; today, nearly five decades after the de-colonization of Africa was set in place, and almost 70 years after the independence of India, the situation remains substantially unaltered. The educated among Asians, Africans, and the Arabs know something of their own culture and something of the West but almost nothing of each other. Kamaladevi’s writings on Asia, Africa, and the global South convey her

awareness of the gravity of the problem. “India and the countries of Asia”, she was to write in an article entitled “The Awakening of Asia”, “have from early time been influencing one another.” Those ties had, however, “loosened and thinned”, and only the “gradual attainment to nationhood of the long-enslaved peoples” of Asian nations would “revive the embers of old, faded friendships and weave afresh the decayed threads of Asian relations.”¹⁸ “The Struggle of Vietnam against French Imperialism”, published in 1947 in the Calcutta-based *Modern Review*, shows her firm grasp over the history of colonialism in Vietnam.¹⁹ Kamaladevi was never seduced by the idea that the European left stood for progressive policies with respect to the question of empire, and her piece is unequivocally clear in its critique of the failure of the left in France to ally itself with Vietnamese nationalists agitating for independence. She deplored the reinstatement of French rule after Vietnam’s ‘liberation’ from Japanese occupation. Kamaladevi is, remarkably, equally unsparing towards the Japanese. She warned in many pieces and lectures of Japan’s attempts to position itself as the vanguard of pan-Asianism; in a book on the Japanese that is in parts appreciative and in parts critical, she could write of their pretensions to leadership with withering scorn:

“The Japanese have a breath-taking way of simplifying things. . . . According to them, this vast continent of Asia is to be one family, its people, children of the Nipponese Tenno [Emperor], owing complete allegiance to him! . . . Of course, it went without saying that Japan being both the most highly industrialised and militarized, would be the industrial spearhead and military protector. The others would come in the order ascribed to them. This is not Imperialism, they protest, for here, everyone has a place and nobody is to be exploited. If we interpret it otherwise, they solemnly assert, it is because of our English education!”²⁰

Kamaladevi’s work throughout offers a marvelous display of her wit, panache, and insurgent spirit. In the three decades following independence, Kamaladevi continued not only to represent India as an emissary of the country but also offered something of an articulation of the idea of the global South which seems rather prescient. Her book, *In War-torn China* (1942), relays her experience of China as it valiantly struggled against Japanese aggression. I suspect that had she been alive today, she would have been sensitive to the achievements of Chinese civilization and would have assessed Chinese foreign policy partly as inspired by the desire to ensure that the Chinese would never again have to undergo the humiliations that were

heaped upon them after their defeats in the Opium Wars and the creation of foreign spheres of influence in China. Nevertheless, I am quite certain that she would also have been critical of the self-aggrandizement that has characterized recent Chinese conduct in Asia and Africa. It is sometimes thought that Kamaladevi may have been idealistic, but she was never naïve. And even the global South may have been a stepping stone to something larger. The conception of the world citizen is a disturbingly anodyne one, but Kamaladevi seems to be one of those rare persons of whom one can use this designation without having to sneer. It is her unshakeable conviction in the dignity of all people that impresses the most.

Notes

1. Her most important writings on these subjects include *Indian Handicrafts* (New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1963); *Carpets and Floor Coverings of India* (Bombay: Taraporevala, 1969); *Handicrafts of India* (New Delhi: Indian Council for Cultural Relations, 1975); and *Indian Embroidery* (New Delhi: Wiley Eastern, 1977). For a brief glimpse into some of her thoughts on Indian arts and handicrafts, the reader is referred to *A Passionate Life: Writings by and on Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay*, eds. Ellen Carol DuBois and Vinay Lal (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2017), 298-322. Though Kamaladevi was not a Bengali, only marrying a Bengali and taking on his last name, Chattopadhyay, those who have written on her have followed the Bengali convention of referring to a person by her or his first name. I have done likewise in the body of this paper.
2. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, *Inner Recesses Outer Spaces: Memoirs* (New Delhi: Navrang, 1986; reprint ed., New Delhi: India International Centre & Niyogi Books, 2014), 27.
3. Pundita Ramabai Sarasvati, *The High-Caste Hindu Woman*, with an introduction by Rachel L. Brodley (Philadelphia: Jas B. Rodgers Printing Co., 1888).
4. Chattopadhyay, *Inner Recesses*, 38.
5. See DuBois and Lal, *A Passionate Life*, 67-97; for excerpts from “The Status of Women in India”, see 70-75.
6. *Ibid.*, 46-47.
7. *Ibid.*, 47.
8. Cemil Aydin, “Beyond Civilization: Pan-Islamism, Pan-Asianism, and the Revolt against the West”, *Journal of Modern European History* 4, no. 2 (2006), 204-223, esp. 214-15. “The victory of Japan, an Asiatic country,” wrote Jawaharlal Nehru to his daughter Indira, “had a far-reaching effect on all the countries of Asia. . . . A great European Power had been defeated; therefore Asia could still defeat Europe as it had done so often in the past. Nationalism spread more rapidly over the eastern countries

- and the cry of 'Asia for Asiatics' was heard." See *Glimpses of World History*, with 50 maps by J. F. Horrabin (New York: The John Day Co, 1942), 464.
9. Chattopadhyay, *Inner Recesses*, 125.
 10. *Ibid.*, 127.
 11. *Ibid.*, 128-29. Nehru represented the Indian National Congress at the first meeting of the League against Imperialism in 1927 in Brussels. It was the second meeting in Frankfurt that Kamaladevi attended two years later, and she states that "it was a novel experience for me to be received as a mature political personality whereas in India I had been treated as a youth with condescension by elders" (130). For a recent account of the League, see Fredrik Petersson, "Hub of the Anti-Imperialist Movement: The League against Imperialism and Berlin, 1927-1933", *Interventions* 16, no. 1 (2014): 49-71. A major force in the activities of the League was the Indian revolutionary, Viren Chattopadhyay, who is believed to have been killed in Stalin's purges around 1937. Kamaladevi admits that Chatto (as he was known) was "an important figure in this Congress" and that he facilitated her meetings with "many leading personalities" (129), but she does not reveal that he was also the older brother of her estranged husband, Harindranath Chattopadhyay. Chatto was married to Agnes Smedley, who became an important figure in American communism, and the Chattopadhyay family included the older sister, Sarojini Naidu, one of the principal figures in the history of 20th century India, and a younger sister, Suhasini, who was the first woman member of the Communist Party of India. A social and intellectual history of this extraordinary entire family is still awaited. What is most germane for the present is Kamaladevi's remarkable and palpable reticence, perhaps unsurprising in someone who had a disdain for small talk and was keen that nothing should move the reader to distraction from the political narrative, in speaking about her personal life in her memoirs. The only biography of Virendranath Chattopadhyay is by Nirode K. Barooah, *Chatto: The Life and Times of an Indian Anti-Imperialist in Europe* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2004).
 12. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, *Uncle Sam's Empire* (Bombay: Padma Publications, 1944); *idem*, *America: The Land of Superlatives* (Bombay: Phoenix Publications, 1946). For excerpts from her writings on the US, see DuBois and Lal, *A Passionate Life*, 269-97.
 13. Chattopadhyay, *Inner Recesses*, 241-44.
 14. *Ibid.*, 252.
 15. See, for example, Shyam Saran, *Cultural and Civilizational Links between India and Southeast Asia: Historical and Contemporary Dimensions* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018); Amitav Acharya, *Civilizations in Embrace: The Spread of Ideas and the Transformation of Power; India and Southeast Asia in the Classical Age* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2012).
 16. Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Indo-China Relations, 600-1400 AD* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2003; new ed., Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015).
 17. On the ubiquity of Gujarati traders in the Indian Ocean world, see Amitav Ghosh, *In an Antique Land: History in the Guise of a Traveler's Tale* (New Delhi: Ravi Dayal

Publishers; London: Granta, 1992); Janet L. Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991).

18. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, "The Awakening of Asia", in her *At the Cross-Roads*, ed. Yusuf Meherally (Bombay: National Information and Publications, 1947), 180-81.
19. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, "Struggle of Vietnam against French Imperialism", *Modern Review* 81 (March 1947), 189-92.
20. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, *Japan, Its Weakness and Strength* (Bombay: Padma Publications, 1943), 48-49.