

Introduction

HOMELESS



IN THE AUTUMN OF 1947, A FORTY-FOUR-YEAR-OLD WOMAN VISITED A cavernous building in New Delhi known as the P-Block. The British Raj had just fallen. Two nations—India and Pakistan—had emerged from the wreckage of colonial rule. For generations, imperial authorities had stoked distrust between India’s largest religious communities. As the colonial state retreated, that distrust turned violent on a staggering scale. More than half a million people would die and more than ten million would flee their homes in one of the largest and bloodiest mass migrations in human history.¹

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay arrived at the P-Block, the headquarters of the new Relief and Rehabilitation Secretariat, with a plan to resettle thousands of the refugees who had arrived in Delhi. Known throughout the subcontinent by her first name, Kamaladevi had acquired a considerable reputation for her work in the socialist and women’s movements and for having spent years in prison for her opposition to the British Raj. She worked closely with Mahatma Gandhi and with India’s first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. Yet the officials of the Relief and Rehabilitation Secretariat did not respond to her request that land be allocated to the refugees. Undeterred by the bureaucracy’s indifference, she identified a patch of open terrain about twelve miles from the city and informed the authorities that if an appropriate alternative was not provided in the next three days, she

would personally escort a group of refugees to claim the land. She hired trucks and worked with the refugees to gather all that was needed to build a temporary settlement. The night before they were to move, a letter arrived providing the land.²

Kamaladevi helped to organize a new city for refugees just outside of Delhi. Often described as a “model” community, the new town of Faridabad would house 30,000 people on some 1,500 acres. “From an unsightly settlement of ragged tents and squalid huts only a year and a half ago,” the *New York Times* declared in October 1951, “Faridabad has become a model of combined suburban and rural development with homes, jobs, schools and public health service for all.” With its own electric powerhouse, a 150-bed hospital, and a range of small, collaboratively run businesses—from a dairy farm to a button factory—Faridabad testified to the hope and hard work of thousands of uprooted people, the dedication of dozens of social workers, and the vision and determination of one indomitable woman.³

Kamaladevi’s support for refugees was an act of empathy across many divides. Unlike most of the people she strove to empower, she had been born into wealth and status. Kamaladevi Dhareshwar entered the world on April 3, 1903, in Mangalore, a small city on the Arabian Sea in the present-day state of Karnataka. Her family belonged to one of the most affluent and educated communities in colonial India, the Chitrapur Saraswat Brahmins. Her life turned toward adversity when her father died without leaving a will. Most of the family’s wealth was inherited by a male relative, leaving Kamaladevi, her sisters, and her mother in a precarious position. At the age of eleven, Kamaladevi was married to an older boy from one of Mangalore’s wealthiest families. Only a year later, the boy died, leaving Kamaladevi a child widow at a time when widows were often expected to live austere and secluded lives. With support from her mother, Kamaladevi broke social custom by pursuing her own education and, at the age of sixteen, falling in love and remarrying across lines of language, region, and caste.⁴

With her new husband, she sang and acted in plays and films at a time when “respectable” women rarely performed on stage or for a camera, and she traveled to England to pursue a degree in sociology at a time when few Indian women studied abroad. After returning to India to support Gandhi’s noncooperation movement, Kamaladevi became one of the first women to contest a legislative election in colonial India. She played a key role in the creation of the All India Women’s Conference (AIWC) and helped lead that organization as its first secretary. In 1930, when Gandhi launched a

civil disobedience campaign while limiting the participation of women, Kamaladevi confronted him, helped to change his mind, and then herself became one of the first women arrested. She spent over two years in prison, some of that time in solitary confinement.

Kamaladevi emerged from prison to find that her husband had been having an affair. She broke yet another taboo by divorcing him. In 1934, she helped found a socialist group within the Indian National Congress and emerged as one of the most influential leaders of the left wing of the freedom struggle. She was also among the most traveled. During the Second World War, she journeyed across the United States, Japan, and war-torn China before returning to India, where she was arrested yet again. After her release, she joined the Congress Working Committee—the party’s highest body—at one of the most crucial junctures in the history of the freedom struggle. Along with her socialist colleagues, she opposed the partition of India, a stance that brought her close to Gandhi toward the end of his life. Kamaladevi brought Gandhi her plans to support refugees, and he offered his blessings along with one piece of advice: don’t depend on government support.

Kamaladevi’s relationship with the government of India was fraught. In many ways, she followed Gandhi’s advice, refusing positions of high power and focusing instead on working to foster grassroots social change. From the 1950s to the 1980s, she dedicated most of her time to supporting the arts and crafts, which she saw as vital cultural traditions and as sources of sustainable income, particularly for rural and indigenous communities. Her focus on handicrafts was very Gandhian—an extension of the Mahatma’s emphasis on the spinning wheel, “village industries,” and a decentralized economy. Yet Kamaladevi was not averse to mobilizing the power of the government. She served as the director of the All India Handicrafts Board and held a variety of other governmental or quasi-governmental positions. She was an institution builder. In addition to her work with the AIWC and the Handicrafts Board, she played a key role in founding or supporting the Indian Cooperative Union, Lady Irwin College, the National Theatre Centre, the Sangeet Natak Akademi, the India International Centre, and a range of other institutions that continue to shape India’s vibrant social and cultural life.⁵

This is the story of Kamaladevi and of the making of modern India. Kamaladevi dreamed of a country that was free of much more than British rule; she demanded an end to poverty, sexism, and caste oppression. She lived long

enough to see many of her dreams frustrated, but hers is not a story of defeat. Kamaladevi embodied the lasting promise of the Indian freedom struggle, understood not as a narrowly political campaign that ended in 1947 but as a confluence of dreams, experiments, and radical social movements. Here is the key lesson that Kamaladevi's story reveals about the making of modern India: it was the coming together of multiple causes that gave the freedom struggle its dynamic strength. By recognizing the intersection of different injustices and cultivating connections across movements, Kamaladevi fostered a pluralistic and inclusive India. It is the way she knitted together a variety of struggles that explains why the historian Ramachandra Guha has written that Kamaladevi "has strong claims to being regarded as the greatest Indian woman of modern times."⁶

Kamaladevi envisioned a democratic India that would transcend narrow, state-centered definitions of democracy. Scholars have uncovered the radical political imaginaries of many Indian anticolonial activists and have mapped the distance between those imaginaries and the forms of governance that came to define the political landscape of India. Many anticolonial leaders pursued radical conceptions of democracy that transcended representative government and that promised a freedom that went well beyond national independence. Few were as bold in their democratic visions as Kamaladevi—and even fewer pursued those visions with her combination of ferocity and integrity. She insisted that the freedom of India was bound up with the freedom of women, the poor, and those oppressed because of race, caste, religion, or other forms of identity, and she helped build coalitions to fight for such a multifaceted and inclusive freedom. Her life offers a unique perspective on the radical potential of Indian democracy.⁷

Kamaladevi's intersectional politics were not constrained by national borders. She was a global thinker. Her life and work spanned multiple continents. Among the most prominent leaders of the freedom struggle, she had international connections rivaled only by those of Jawaharlal Nehru. It was not the sheer scale of her global ties that was most remarkable. Rather, it was by combining her global vision with local activism—and linking both to an inclusive nationalism—that Kamaladevi embodied the transnational potential of the Indian freedom struggle. When the novelist Raja Rao called Kamaladevi "firmly Indian and therefore universal," he recognized one of her greatest feats—the way in which she forged connections across the borders of race, nation, class, and gender, all while embracing the full powers of her own identity as an Indian woman.⁸

Kamaladevi linked her bold vision for India to an expansive conception of solidarity across what would come to be known as the Global South. Over her lifetime, Kamaladevi embraced a range of transnational solidarities—most of which were explicitly anticolonial and antiracist. In the 1930s and 1940s, she was one of the most prominent South Asian advocates of unity among people of color, unity within what the African American intellectual and activist W. E. B. Du Bois called the “dark world” or the “colored world.”⁹ Kamaladevi’s solidarity with African American struggles and with African political and cultural movements empowered her to help shape what the art historian Joan Kee has called “the geometries of Afro Asia.”¹⁰ Afro-Asian solidarity is often dated to the Bandung Conference of 1955, but Kamaladevi’s life reveals the importance of rooting Afro-Asian ties in the politics of the 1930s and 1940s—and of recognizing the fluid borders of ideas like the “colored world.” As the Second World War gave way to the Cold War, Kamaladevi defended the independence of “nonaligned” countries, a group that was often equated with the so-called Third World. The “colored world,” “Afro-Asian solidarity,” “nonalignment,” the “Third World”—Kamaladevi knew that such labels mattered to the degree that they were creatively and lovingly given meaning in the world and positioned in opposition to inequity and oppression.¹¹ According to the anthropologist Sinah Theres Kloß, “The Global South should be considered a political consciousness, an engaged and possibly liminal practice through which global unequal power structures are actively restructured.” Kamaladevi brought such a political consciousness to the colored world, Afro-Asian solidarity, the Third World, and the Global South, although none of these terms fully captured her imagination. She preferred people to political labels, refused to be bounded by any one community or identity, and built bridges across divides of many kinds.¹²

Kamaladevi’s bridge-building—both within India and across the world—was a creative practice shaped by her love for handicrafts, drama, dance, music, and all forms of art. Many histories of the freedom struggle and of independent India have little to say about art or artists. By contrast, Kamaladevi’s life positions art—broadly understood—at the center of India’s history. Taking seriously the art of freedom requires doing more than respecting the imagination of political actors or the political power of artists; it requires reimagining, as Kamaladevi did, the meaning of both art and freedom.¹³

Kamaladevi’s main art form was the written word. While often seen primarily as a social reformer, Kamaladevi understood herself as a writer and

a thinker, too, and she deserves to be recognized as one of the most creative and prolific public intellectuals in twentieth-century India. Consider this description of Kamaladevi offered by her socialist colleague Yusuf Meherally: “She always carries a typewriter with her even on her travels, much to the exasperation of her friends, and sits in a crowded third class railway compartment, typing out articles direct on the machine instead of writing them first by hand.” Over the course of her life, Kamaladevi authored over a dozen books and scores of essays on topics ranging from social policy to the arts to her own life. Her writings blend poetic vision with pragmatic detail. Many remain profoundly relevant. Kamaladevi wrote to advance specific ideas, to fight for the future of India and the world, and to cope with her own tumultuous life. “No matter how great the depression or tension,” she explained in her autobiography, “writing melts it away.”¹⁴

Kamaladevi did not like to talk about the more difficult moments in her life. “Whatever the modern trend may be,” she wrote in her memoirs, “I do not think that in a life story one is required to lower the barriers of the discreet reticence which govern our everyday life and affairs.” Over the several hundred pages of her memoirs, she chose not to mention her son’s birth or either of her marriages. This reticence was shaped by the ways her private life had long been used against her. As a divorced woman who refused to abide by the gendered expectations of her time, Kamaladevi’s private life became a source of gossip and a weapon in the hands of her opponents. Her decision to keep quiet about many facets of her life was not, however, solely a result of outward pressure. Kamaladevi explained her reticence as a result of a paradox in her personality, a paradox that makes it even more remarkable that she chose to participate in so many of the major events of her time. “I seem bold, aggressive, out-going, having been a fighter all my life,” she wrote. “But in reality, I am shy and retiring, rather averse to crowds and addressing large gatherings.” Rather than try to explain the origins of that contrast, she wrote simply, “Some of us can be full of contradictions.” Along with her vision, her passion, and her courage, it is Kamaladevi’s contradictions that make her life so compelling.¹⁵

In this introduction, I have argued that Kamaladevi’s life reveals three key lessons about the making of modern India: that bridges between organizations, communities, and social causes empowered the freedom struggle; that those bridges extended beyond the borders of the nation; and that the process of bridge-building required the imagination of artists of many kinds. In the chapters that follow, I aim to give substance to these arguments, while

narrating a life that went well beyond such arguments, a life that cannot be contained in any academic frame. Of course, all of our lives ultimately defy the kind of abstractions that scholars depend upon to understand the messy realities of lived experience. Kamaladevi's life is extraordinary, however, both in the degree to which she shaped many of the most important events, organizations, and processes that "made" modern India, and in the degree to which she refused to be bounded by anything or anyone.

Chapter 1, "Born to Rebel," explores Kamaladevi's fraught family dynamics in the context of gender and caste politics and the evolution of the colonial state in the first decades of the twentieth century. I argue that Kamaladevi's privileges empowered her in a variety of ways but that it was her hardships—and especially the difficulties she faced as a child widow—that most defined her sense of social mission. Kamaladevi was born just a few years after the turn of the twentieth century, and her life would be bound up with many of the promises and catastrophes of that bloody century. From her childhood, however, she fought to define for herself what her life would be and dreamed of an India that offered such freedom to everyone—regardless of gender, class, caste, religion, or other form of identity.

Chapter 2, "Bridging Revolutions," begins with Kamaladevi's candidacy for a place in the Madras Legislative Council in 1926. She came very close to becoming the first woman elected to a legislative assembly in colonial India, and her race positioned her to assume a leadership position in the All India Women's Conference. This chapter focuses on her work with the AIWC and her evolving understanding of women's activism. Other topics include her travels to international conferences in Europe and her involvement in the Indian youth movement. Kamaladevi's support for women's rights was, from the outset, a bridge to a variety of other concerns and struggles, particularly her anticolonial activism. While she was one of the most prominent Indian women arguing that the freedom of women was inseparable from the freedom of colonized peoples throughout the world, Kamaladevi was certainly not unique in blending feminism (a term she rejected) with anticolonial activism. Indeed, her activism offers a useful perspective on the international and ideological expansiveness of the women's movement during the interwar period.

Chapter 3, "Salt and Solitary," begins with Kamaladevi's arrest in 1930 and focuses on her approach to nonviolent civil disobedience and her time in jail during the first half of the 1930s. Using the copious records that the police maintained—records that track Kamaladevi's activities on a daily

basis—I assess Kamaladevi’s leadership within the salt *satyagraha*. I argue that Kamaladevi played a central role in convincing Gandhi to include women in all facets of the protest, as well as in bridging labor activism and anticolonial struggles. Her efforts were not always successful. Her story demonstrates the persistence of patriarchy within the Congress, as well as the challenge of recruiting urban workers to a movement led by wealthy elites. Through her eyes, the salt *satyagraha* emerges as a multifaceted struggle to wrest power from the colonial state, while attacking the inequities that continued to mark Indian society.

Chapter 4, “Democratic Socialism,” explores Kamaladevi’s participation in the founding of the Congress Socialists, her understanding of socialism, and how her class politics intersected with her approach to issues of gender. Another key facet of this chapter concerns her attention to the politics of the princely states and her confrontations with the governments of Travancore and Mysore in particular. I make the case that Kamaladevi helped to craft an inclusive and democratic socialist movement within India, while pushing the Indian National Congress to more aggressively champion democratic movements within the princely states. Kamaladevi’s radical vision of Indian unity at times led her to minimize religious division and to downplay the importance of directly confronting caste inequity. To be clear, Kamaladevi strongly opposed casteism and any kind of religious chauvinism or discrimination. Like many of her socialist colleagues, however, she believed a class-based revolution would end all forms of oppression, and she underestimated the persistence of religious and caste-based division.

Chapter 5, “Freedom Abroad, Prison at Home,” follows Kamaladevi from the United Kingdom to the United States, Japan, and China. In the process, I explore the many solidarities she forged with different communities and struggles around the world. I argue that Kamaladevi played a key role in forging ideas and relationships that helped to define what would later be called the Third World and the Global South. She did so by advancing a conception of transnational solidarity that was rooted in intersectional politics—particularly a politics driven by struggles against sexism, racism, and xenophobia. This chapter also explores her participation in the Quit India movement and her last stint in a colonial prison, an especially difficult and harrowing experience that left her with lasting health problems but did nothing to dull her determination or her commitment to achieving the full promise of India’s freedom.

Chapter 6, “Triumph and Tragedy,” focuses on her work with the Congress

Working Committee in the years before independence, her response to the refugee crisis and the assassination of Gandhi, and her vision for independent India. Kamaladevi's efforts and her writings provide a unique vantage point on the trauma of partition and on the importance of refugee resettlement to the history of community development in India. Too often, the year 1947 serves as a narrative wall preventing scholars from tracking the ideas and efforts that helped shape how India emerged from the wreckage of the British Raj. Many of Kamaladevi's hopes were destroyed with partition, yet she did not stop fighting to achieve the freedom she had long envisioned for her country. Her efforts reveal the blend of change and continuity that shaped the transition from colonialism to India's democratic experiment.

Chapter 7, "Crafting a Nation," charts Kamaladevi's relationship with the Socialist Party, her campaign to win a legislative seat, and her pathbreaking work with cooperatives and with arts and handicrafts organizations. Kamaladevi's experiences offer insights regarding the importance of both women and the arts to the history of development within India, a history often still framed around the decisions of elite men. India's craft renaissance blended cultural preservation with rural development in a way that promised to increase income for millions of Indian artisans—many of them women. Despite Kamaladevi's efforts, the booming Indian craft sector failed to alleviate rural poverty at anywhere near the scale Kamaladevi had hoped would be possible. This is not, however, a story of total failure. Kamaladevi helped to create organizations and networks that continue to promote the arts and to support rural artisans—redefining both development and Indian culture.

Chapter 8, "Cultural Revolutions," examines Kamaladevi's efforts to forge connections across both national and cultural borders, efforts that she advanced by supporting organizations such as the India International Centre (IIC) and the World Crafts Council (WCC). The IIC embodied Kamaladevi's vision of an India that was cosmopolitan and inclusive—both in regard to global diversity and in regard to the regional, linguistic, and religious diversity that defines India itself. The WCC, by contrast, aimed to be global but was often focused disproportionately on Europe and North America. Kamaladevi reenergized old Afro-Asian solidarities and built new ties across Asia in an effort to create a counterbalance within the WCC and within the larger world of arts and crafts. While supporting the IIC and challenging the WCC to live up to its global image, Kamaladevi continued to champion local Indian artisans and the handicrafts they produced. She published several

books on Indian handicrafts that celebrated both the diversity and unity of cultural traditions within India. An effort to balance diversity and unity had long defined her politics as well. As Kamaladevi entered the last phase of her life, however, her engagement with politics narrowed and she became increasingly distant from some of the causes she had long advanced.

Chapter 9, “Homecoming,” charts Kamaladevi’s vexed relationship with younger Indian feminists, many of whom rejected her concerns about the divisive nature of “Western feminism.” While Kamaladevi’s critique of feminism distanced her from many younger activists, her focus on the intersectionality of sexism with other forms of oppression connected her with advocates of what came to be known as “Third World feminism.” Within South Asia, Kamaladevi’s advocacy of women’s collaboratives and cottage industries helped create networks that would contribute to the flourishing of women’s self-help groups. As she had throughout her life, Kamaladevi saw the creativity of women as a driver of social change and as a bridge-building force that could connect struggles against sexism, poverty, and other forms of inequity and oppression. The last ten years of Kamaladevi’s life were marked by personal and health-related struggles, but she never stopped fighting to achieve the full promise of Indian freedom.

The epilogue, “The Art of Freedom,” reexamines key themes in Kamaladevi’s life and offers a broad analysis of what her life reveals about the creation of modern India. I focus in particular on contested conceptions of freedom and on Kamaladevi’s intersectional approach to the variety of social movements she championed. Many of those movements continue, if in different form and in the face of new challenges. The freedom Kamaladevi sought remains only partially achieved. Her life offers vital insights and inspiration for all those who believe in the future of democracy in India and beyond.