

From the Bhavan's President  
Centenary Tribute  
**Smt. Kamaladevi  
Chattopadhyay**

(1903-1988)

R. Venkataraman



**I**t is an honour to pay homage to the precious memory of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay. I find it difficult to prefix the word 'late' to Kamaladevi's name. Hers was and will always be a palpable presence.

I had the privilege of knowing Kamaladevi for several decades. It was my good fortune to have trod common ground with her in a number of fields. "Venkataraman, you are the right person for this task," she would say to me, both as a compliment and as a challenge.

Kamaladevi made every one of her friends feel that she had a special interest in each of them. That was a great quality in her. Kamaladevi had a creative touch that was altogether unique.

Flowerbuds seemed to blossom at her touch — whether they were flowerbuds of human beings or institutions. She also had a galvanic touch that was equally unique. People became more human and more sensitive to the deeper impulses of social good when they came in contact with her.

Two interests were close to her heart. One was human justice and the other was human creativity or self-expression. In fact, her entire life was a continuous dialogue with questions of either justice or creativity. And the fields she covered — political, social, aesthetic and the purely human — were imbued by these twin interests: justice and creativity.

Even in her teens, Kamaladevi became agonizingly aware of the injustice of British rule and acquired a burning desire to serve the motherland through political work. But politics for her was not to be a chessboard of power games. Rather, she saw it as an instrument for improving the lot of the people. And people not as some doctrine abstraction but as actual human beings with hopes, sorrows, fears and aspirations. The idiom of Gandhiji's movement coalesced with the poetry of Kamaladevi's sensibility. Kamaladevi writes in her brilliant *Memoirs*:

"I was fascinated by the Champaran struggle conducted by Gandhiji. Here was something in which the real people of the country were involved. Through their organisation, will, determination and loyalty, they could stand up to the oppression

of the indigo planters backed by a foreign regime. Exploitation was no vague term, it was concrete and meaningful to my own growing sense of the ills in our society."

After Kamaladevi's first meeting with Gandhiji in Bombay when she was only sixteen years old, the die was cast. Attending the 1919 Satyagraha Sabha in Bombay, one of Kamaladevi's early political acts was to hawk copies of Gandhiji's banned book *Hind Swaraj*. Not realizing it



Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay herself, Kamaladevi was already blazing a new trail. Here was a young girl from a traditional family, whom society had once labelled as a 'child-widow' not just coming out into the open but actually doing political propaganda!

Enlisting herself in the Seva Dal, during the 1924 Belgaum Congress, Kamaladevi imbued

the volunteers, especially the women, with a new life. She was entrusted with the task of training *swayamsevikas*, an activity that brought her to the very heart of India's women and youth. Elected President of the Youth Congress in December 1929, Kamaladevi appealed to the National Congress leaders to declare *Poorna Swaraj* as their goal. This was done at the very next session of the Congress, the historic Session over which Jawaharlalji presided.

On January 26, 1930, Kamaladevi captured the imagination of the entire nation when in a scuffle, she clung to the Tricolour in order to protect it. Blows rained on her as she stood like a rock to protect the Flag, bleeding profusely.

Again in April 1930, Kamaladevi was one of those chosen to defy the Salt Law at Bombay. In the police attack on the people making salt on portable stoves on the Chowpatty sands, Kamaladevi received a *lathi* blow on her back. She fell on the blazing coals and received

severe burn injuries. But she refused to be escorted by the police to a hospital and preferred continuing to defy the Salt Law.

In the traditions of Indian theatre, music and crafts, Kamaladevi had found the very essence of our civilization and so Kamaladevi and Shri Harindranath Chattopadhyay toured the country as a theatre group and thereby revitalized the decaying art of popular theatre and, at the same time, used the medium to remind spectators about India's destiny. Very soon Kamaladevi became known throughout the length and breadth of the country as a talented revolutionary.

She galvanised the All-India Women's Conference into a dynamic movement, taking up the cause of women's working conditions everywhere and especially in vulnerable sectors such as in plantations and mines. Together with Margaret Cousins, Kamaladevi took up the right of women to maternity leave so strongly as to make that concept an axiomatic part of

service regulations.

Equally memorable was Kamaladevi's role in organising women workers in Madurai's textile mills and in ameliorating the arduous conditions of women workers in the cashew export business. What is significant is that she undertook these trade union activities on behalf of women workers with absolutely no desire to become a trade union leader. For her, service of women labourers was its own justification, its own reward.

Kamaladevi's natural empathy for the downtrodden made her one of the founder members of the Congress Socialist party and, in 1936, she became its President. In the Congress Socialist Party, she espoused the causes of equality of sexes, transfer of power to the hands of the working classes and the concept of planned economic development.

As Chief Minister of Madras, Kamaraj wanted Kamaladevi to succeed the late Shri Sri Prakasa as Governor. Similarly, Shri Nabakrushna Chowdhury, the Chief Minister

of Orissa wanted her to become Governor of Orissa. When these suggestions were made to Jawaharlalji, all he said was: "See if you can persuade her". She declined to go as Ambassador to Moscow and Cairo. But Jawaharlalji never insisted on her acceptance. He knew that Kamaladevi was essentially meant for public service and not public office although she could have adorned any of them with ease and effectiveness.

After Independence, Kamaladevi made New Delhi her headquarters. Her political interests deepened into social interests and she turned increasingly towards the world of Indian crafts. Every weaver's hut became her home and every loom her working desk. She viewed crafts not with the superficial eye of a drawing room decorator but as one for whom crafts were the very breath of culture, a way of life. With uncanny thoroughness, Kamaladevi came to know the living and working conditions of

artisans all over the country. A standard-bearer of revolution and justice, Kamaladevi soon became an ombudsman for the artisans of India, a lodestar and a point of reference. Her interest in crafts spread beyond India's frontiers. She travelled to different continents to study their craft forms and spread the message that crafts were a universal language and were not a thing apart from life.

Kamaladevi's services were utilised by the World Crafts Council of which she became a chief architect.

Kamaladevi and Rukmini Devi were the *raga* and the *tala* which together revived our traditional *sangeet* and *nataka*. Similarly, Kamaladevi and Pupul Jayakar functioned as the warp and the weft of our handlooms revival.

Whether it was the All-India Women's Conference, the Central Cottage Industries Emporium, Sangeet Natak Akademi, the All-India Handicrafts Board, the World Crafts Council, the Theatre

Crafts Museum, the Indian Council for Cultural Relations, the Children's Book Trust, India International Centre and countless organisations of different size and scope — Kamaladevi gave them all her best, like a guardian angel.

A genuine Gandhian but never a faddist, a genuine socialist but never doctrinaire, an emancipator of women but never a libber, a patron of the arts but never a dilettante, Kamaladevi could see with crystal clarity the genuine from the false, the real from the superficial, the long-lasting from the ephemeral. Her writings and occasional speeches, therefore, always rang true. They went straight to the heart of the matter. She used words with economy, skill and depth. No extra or inappropriate expression ever escaped from her pen or her lips. Quality demands care. And Kamaladevi stood for quality.

To recapture that spirit of service and dedication one has to remember Kamaladevi and emulate her example. May India produce many Kamaladevis.

## Life lived and 'Unlived'

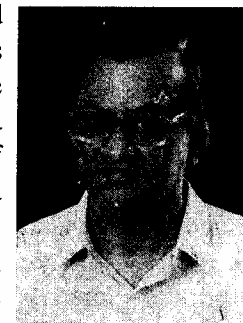
V. N. Narayanan

Most people's lives are composed overwhelmingly of 'unliving' and a tiny bit of 'living'. It is the Adi Shankaras and Mozarts who transcend this general rule, not allowing any 'unlived' time in their adult lives.

The surest prescription for a human's immortality is the smooth blending of the medium with the message at a level where the medium matches the genius of the message. This has been so all through history. Rama needed his Valmiki, Socrates his Plato, Christ his Apostles, Guru Nanak his nine successors and the Guru Granth Sahib and Samuel Johnson his Boswell. It was the misfortune of India that at the dawn of freedom, Mahatma Gandhi, the message, had a mismatch with Jawaharlal Nehru, the medium.

Today, thanks to television, internet and the global information revolution, there are no messages of any relevance and, in Marshall McLuhan's profound phrase, the medium itself has become the message. We see TV because it is there; we climb a mountain because it is there. And newspapers are more seen than read.

Is there a causal connection between immortality and dying in one's thirties? That's an intriguing thought. Vivekananda died at the age of 39, having achieved fame and three lifetimes in those brief years. Alexander



V. N. Narayanan