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## Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay: A Cultural Heritage Revivalist of India

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**Abstract:** India was a British colony during the colonial period. During this time India lost sovereign power. British used India as a source place of raw materials for industrial finished products. India became the market of British machine-made products. As a result, Indian traditional village cottage and handicraft industries ruined gradually. India faced de-industrialization and large scale of jobless situation. This issue drew the attention to the Indian national leaders in the time of Indian National movement. Mahatma Gandhi took the initiative to rebirth Indian village cottage and handicraft industries. He used “charka” and made “khadi” in place of foreign goods which was also the agenda of Indian National Congress. Congress working committee spread this agenda to the Indian masses. At that time one of the Congress female activists named Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay inspired by the vision of Gandhiji and took part as a member of Congress. She was a feminist social reformer, freedom fighter and theatre activist of India. After independence in 1947 she refused to enter formal politics. In this article researcher will try to focus on Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay was not only a feminist social reformer, freedom fighter and theatre activist but also a cultural heritage revivalist of Indian traditional art and crafts through co-operative movement in grass root level after independence. She set up All India Handicrafts Board and Central Cottage Industries Emporia to preserve Indian traditional handicrafts.

**Keywords:** Colony, Cottage, Handicraft, De-industrialization, Cultural heritage, Revivalist.

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## Introduction

India was a British colony during the colonial period. At the time India lost sovereign power. British used India as a source place of raw materials for industrial finished products. India became the market of British machine-made products. As a result, Indian traditional village cottage and handicraft industries ruined gradually. India faced de-industrialization and large scale of jobless situation. This issue drew the attention to the Indian national leaders in the time of Indian National movement. Mahatma Gandhi took the initiative to rebirth Indian village cottage and handicraft industries. He used “charka” and made “khadi” in place of foreign goods which also the agenda of Indian National Congress. Congress working committee spread this agenda to the Indian masses. At that time one of the Congress female activists named Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay inspired by the vision of Gandhiji and took part as a member of Congress. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay was a feminist social reformer, freedom fighter and theatre activist of India. She was a leading freedom fighter, social reformer, and socialist feminist of India. She was born on 3rd April 1903 in Mangalore which is now a part of Indian state of Karnataka, to an aristocratic family. Her family environment and personal life experiences shaped her rebellious personality. As a child, Kamaladevi inherited the ideas of women’s freedom and emancipation from her mother Girijabai. Girijabai was an admirer of Pandita Ramabai and Annie Besant, two great leaders of women’s movement in India at that time. Kamala Devi’s father was also a progressive-minded person, and he was always supportive to his wife. After the sudden demise of her husband, Girijabai, fearing for Kamala Devi’s uncertain future, arranged the marriage of a daughter at a very young age. Unfortunately, within a year of marriage, Kamaladevi became a widow. In 1920, she remarried of Harindranath Chattopadhyay, the younger brother of greater Indian freedom fighter Sarojini Naidu. Then in 1933 she bravely decided to divorce Harindranath. All these incidents involving Kamaladevi’s personal life are very significant because they have had an extensive effect on her entire life as well as her political career and have taken her thoughts far ahead of her time. She became involved in the women’s movement after encountering Margaret’s cousins, an Irish Indian educationist and social reformer and acknowledged Margaret as her Guru. She also worked with and was inspired by the personalities like Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu under the auspicious of All India women’s conference (AIWC). She jumped into the Indian National movement under the guidance and leadership of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay’s political career began in 1924 when she attended the congress session in Belgaum as a volunteer. In 1926, especially with the help and efforts of Margaret’s cousins, Kamaladevi contested election as an independent candidate from South Canara of the Madras provincial legislative Assembly. But she lost the election by a very narrow margin of votes. She was one of the founding members of All India Women’s Conference established in 1927 and was elected as its first general secretary. In 1928 she became a member of all India Congress Working Committee and later became the secretary

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of the Indian Social Conference. In 1929, presided over the Bombay Youth League. When Mahatma Gandhi announced his plan of Satyagraha in February 1930, Kamaladevi went to meet Gandhiji and requested him to allow women to participate in the movement actively. In a real sense, Gandhian nonviolent movement's gave Indian women the full-fledged opportunity to participate in the national movement. She resigned from the AIWC in 1930 to become a full-time activist in the civil disobedient movement. On April 7, 1930, she led a March in Bombay city and became the first female political prisoner for breaking the salt laws. After her release from prison, she was tasked with organizing the women's wing of the Seva Dal, which was operated by the Indian National Congress. She successfully participated in Nehru's congress working committee of 1947-1948. She was arrested during the quit India movement of 1942 and spent more than a year in jail. However, after India became independent in 1947, she refused to enter formal politics.

## I

Independent India was economically underdeveloped and backward. India, rich in natural resources, was not too weak in human resources. In fact, we can blame the exploitation of the British colonial rule for this backwardness. The colonial and imperialist policies of the British government created obstacles in the way of economic development of India. India was economically crippled in agriculture, industry, and technology. The agricultural system did not improve much during the British period. In the second half of the 19th century, the Indian capitalist class emerged based on the development of modern industry, but they could not independently lead the economic reconstruction of the country in subjugated India. Political subjugation they had to be dependent on the colonial power for economic independence. The pace of development in the subjugated colonial rule was sloppy and unplanned, certainly not thinking about the country and its people. Soon after independence, therefore, the question of development and transformation in a well-planned way became urgent. Whatever industry is built, whether heavy or small, affects the regional economy of the country, it also affects the national economy. But when the country is ruled by foreigners, the economy of that country is run in their interest. There was no shortage of capital, enterprise, raw materials, and markets in subjugated India. But organizing each of these elements to direct economic development in the domestic interests of subjugated India did not have the political independence. After the return of political sovereignty after 1947, the beginning of the thinking of economic restructuring can be seen in several cases in the state and private enterprises of India. Along with Prime Minister Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru in independent India, one of the most significant names in the history of Indian economic restructuring is Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay. Who undertook an effort to restructure another facet of India's economy, particularly in the post-independence phase. It was

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through her efforts that Indian traditional rural handicrafts and cottage industries were reborn in their glory in independent India.

After the independence of India, Kamaladevi completely withdrew from active politics and associated herself with the co-operative movement and development of India's traditional art and handicrafts. She devoted herself to reviving the traditional handicrafts of India. She traveled extensively visiting rural crafts centers. Jasleen Dhamija described these journeys and how she interacted with weavers and craftsmen. Kamaladevi tried utmost to revive many dying arts and crafts of India. She and her team provided credit for the resurgence of 'Tancoi', 'Brocades', 'Kalamkari', 'Pochampalli' and 'Ikat' weaves and 'Kosa' silk. Jasleen Dhamija mentioned that "Kamaladevi in her book 'Inner Recesses Outer Spaces-Memories' writes 'It was only after I met Gandhiji that I came to understand the deep relationship of handicrafts with our daily life.' How enormously beneficial it was for us to live with them and make them an integral part of our everyday existence."<sup>1</sup> And also mentioned that "In 1956, no one had heard of Kalamkari, so when Kamaladevi, accompanied by U. S. Malliah and some of us, made a trip to Kalahasti to meet the last surviving master of this art, Jonnalagadda Lakshmajah, everyone wondered why we were going on a pilgrimage, bypassing Tirupati. Kora Ramamoorthy, the maverick artist, collector, and antique dealer, had traced down the master craftsman and was joining us from Chennai."<sup>2</sup> "Before the government sanctioned the money, Kamaladevi bought the cotton long cloth used for kalamkari from her personal funds and gave an advance to the master for purchasing materials to prepare the dyes. Young boys began to learn to process cloth, prepare dyes, and draw the minor figures."<sup>3</sup> Ramchandra Guha in his book "Makers of Modern India" mention that "From the 1950s, Kamaladevi turned increasingly to the revival and promotion of India's rich, varied, and endangered craft traditions. She established the All-India Handicraft Board and headed it for twenty years."<sup>4</sup> "Cultural Heritage Preservation: The Past, the Present and the Future" edited by Thomas Nilson & Kristina Thorell mentioned that "Cultural Heritage refers to contemporary society's use of the past. 'Our cultural heritage' contributes to the shaping of national stereotypes and regional identity and it's a Modern or postmodern reflection of the past." UNESCO defines cultural heritage as "the legacy of physical artefacts and intangible attributes of a group or society that are inherited from past generations, maintained in the Present and bestowed for the benefit of future generations."<sup>5</sup>

Kamaladevi in her article 'The Crafts: An embodiment of the great folk tradition' in the Courier magazine published by UNESCO in 1969 beautifully analyzed the concept of handicrafts and cottage industry and its importance as a heritage. In this context she mentioned that "Craft has always been a basic activity in human society, in fact it is considered more cohesive and permeating in human relationships than even language, for it can penetrate many barriers to communication. Particularly has this been true of the older societies such as those in Asia, South and Central America, Africa and countries like Greece or Spain, where certain

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aspects of the ancient handed down cultures still continue to produce powerful impressions that seem almost ageless.

The growth of crafts in society was the sign of the cultivation of sensitivity and the stirring and mellowing of humanism. It stood for man's endeavor to bring elegance and grace into an otherwise harsh and drab human existence. In fact, man's elevation from the gross animal existence is marked by his yearning for something beyond the satisfaction of mere creature comforts and needs, which found natural expression in crafts. No aspect of life was too insignificant or humble to lay claim to beauty or acquire sanctity as a symbol of good omen. The use of special articles for special occasions in the way of clothes, jewels, vessels, etc., all of which had to have a certain quality to ensure a high standard even in daily life and use, meant a continuous outflow of creativeness, a sustained spirit of animation and freshness dispelling staleness and monotony. We find, for instance, that in many countries to give solemnity to certain things a convention was established by which they were made into ceremonials. The tea ceremony of Japan is a good example. It requires a special pavilion offering seclusion from the bustle of everyday life, in its own surroundings, and the use of its own vessels or cups, involving the manufacture of special pottery. Though the ideals sought were relaxation, contemplation of beauty and communion with nature, these alone were not regarded as giving complete fulfilment unless they were made part of one's intimate daily life, hence the introduction of the tea ceremony.”<sup>6</sup>

“Two significant characteristics of crafts are that aesthetics and function are integrated, and ornamentation and decoration are not divorced from utility. And even where craftsmanship is based on tradition, the dangers of stagnation are minimized by freeing each productive act from imitative intention and linking it with the stream of life, making it a dynamic manifestation of man's endeavor to express universal human emotions and interests. Even though craftsmanship has always been considered hereditary, passed on from generation to generation, inheritance of actual skills was not assumed. The emphasis on the contrary was on proper education and the right environment for the growing generation. The young craftsman learnt in the family workshop as an apprentice the techniques in their entirety in direct relation to basic production and problems, primarily by practice.”<sup>7</sup>

## II

Freedom of India brought partition in its wake, and she plunged into the rehabilitation of the refugees. Her first task was to set up the Indian cooperative union to help with the rehabilitation, and through the union, she made plan for a township on cooperative lines. At lengths Jawaharlal

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Nehru reluctantly gave her permission on the condition that she did not ask for state assistance, and so after much struggle, the township of Faridabad was set up, on the outskirts of Delhi, rehabilitating over 50000 refugees from the Northwest frontier. She worked tirelessly in helping the refugees to establish new homes and new professions, for this they were trained in the new skills. She also helped set up health facilities in the new town. Betsey Cobb mentioned that “She helped to organize isolated village industries into small units of production, accessible to national and even international markets. Rather than a strict Gandhian approach, urging a return to handicrafts at the expense of modern industrial development, Kamaladevi urges adaptation-she has helped adapt many centuries-old crafts to modern markets, and in so doing she has helped provide a way for village people to support themselves and maintain their crafts as well as their self-respect.”<sup>8</sup> Ramchandra Guha in his book “Makers of Modern India” mention that “She travelled through the country, studying the existing tradition of wearing, pottery, sculpture, metal work, toy making, etc. She formed cooperatives to market the product of craftsmen and to provide their credit. She instituted awards to motivate them. She urged the state governments, to cut out middlemen and to deal directly with craftsmen, source their products and sell them through their own emporia. A healthy competitive rivalry between the states was thereby created. That Indian crafts are still alive and moreover, have a visible national and international presence, is owed more to Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay than to any other individual.”<sup>9</sup> Overcoming multiple hurdles in various marginal areas of India, she was persistent in her efforts to revive the traditional cottage industry of the local people of those marginal areas for the purpose of national economic reconstruction of India. In every area of this traditional rural handicraft and cottage industry she did not lack thorough interest and initiative. Whenever she went through various crises in restoring rural traditional handicraft and cottage industry to its former state, she took initiative to solve its immediate problems. Jamila Brijbhusan mentioned that “The shawl industry was suffering from lack of Pashm, the fine hair of goats reared at a certain elevation which produced the fine shawl, the shawl that could pass through a ring. Kamaladevi insisted on visiting Ladakh to investigate the raw material situation herself. This was long before the road had been constructed or regular flights instituted. After a bumpy flight in a small plane dodging towering mountain peaks, she reached her destination. She was the first Indian woman to undertake the trip and was a subject of awe and curiosity for the local people.”<sup>10</sup> And also mentioned that “For her, now the field of handicrafts offered exciting possibilities. She saw in these products of skilled hands not only an aesthetic quality but a potential for solving at least a part of the economic problems facing the country. To her, handicrafts have been an aesthetic expression that has become a great heritage and should be maintained as such, but she sees in them a desirable vocation in which people can work in their own environment avoiding overcrowding of cities, creation of slums and other evils of modern industrial society. With small capital investment people can be self-employed retaining their self-respect and independence.”<sup>11</sup>

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## III

Traditional rural handicrafts and cottage industries were distinctly famous in several regions of India. This initiative of Kamaladevi in changing the socio-economic life of the local people in those areas was particularly important from the point of view of contemporary India. As she raised himself as a nationalist during the colonial period as a freedom fighter, she gradually became an international figure during the post-independence period. She represented India at UNESCO on the issue of revival and conservation of indigenous traditional handicrafts and cottage industries. She also devoted his life-long efforts to building a new India with success in many fields. Jamila Brijbhusan mentioned that “She has represented India at several international conferences and has been the Government of India’s delegate to the UNESCO and Human Rights Commission. She has been a member of the Indian National commission for cooperation with UNESCO. Indian Council of Cultural Relations; member, National Committee for Perspective Planning for Education; member, national Advisory Board for Industries.”<sup>12</sup> She informed people about Indian traditional rural and handicraft cottage industry with great sincerity. She wrote several important books on this subject such as ‘Handicrafts of India’, ‘India’s Craft tradition’, ‘Indian Handicraft’ and ‘The Glory of Indian Handicrafts’ etc.

## Conclusion

British colonial India lost its political sovereignty and came under colonial rule, the country’s economic infrastructure collapsed. India became a market for manufactured goods and sent raw materials to England for their industrial needs. Lacking political sovereignty, India was forced to de-industrialize rural handicrafts and cottage industries. The contribution of rural handicrafts and cottage industries was important in pre-colonial India. In this case, the tradition of Bengal muslin should not be forgotten. In many similar areas in British India, traditional rural handicrafts and cottage industries were destroyed due to lack of patronage. In 1947, India gained independence and sovereignty through the struggle of the nationalist movement with the imperialist powers. Post-independence India adopted plans to restructure the domestic economy as a basis for overall development of the country. Along with heavy industry in contemporary India, small and rural handicrafts and cottage industries began to regain patronage and flourish. Kamaladevi’s single-minded efforts at this stage to revive traditional Indian rural handicrafts and cottage industries are unparalleled. She not only informed the masses of Indians in different parts of India about this tradition but also demonstrated India’s position on the international level through personal creative work efforts. It was through her initiative that the rural handicrafts and cottage industries considered as the national heritage of independent India were revived and came under preservation. Also, this tradition highlighted its innovative features at the national and

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international level. The revival of traditional Indian rural handicrafts and cottage industries played an important role in the socio-economic development of the regionally dispersed groups. People involved in various industries at the regional level were helped to set up small scale industrial enterprises with locally available raw materials. As a result, it was possible to increase the national income and allow these small and rural cottage industries of the marginal level of the country to compete in the globalized market.

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