

The Activist Origins of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay's International Thought

Written by Shruti Balaji

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SHRUTI BALAJI, AUG 4 2023

At some point in our lives, we have all heard some version of the question: 'If you could have dinner with any person living or dead, who would it be?' In response, I have imagined myself having a dinner conversation with Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay. Besides being both an amusing and delightful thought exercise, this imaginative leap is productive as we go about the (disciplinary) task of recovering historical women international thinkers. First, it loosens our thinking about where and how intellectual ideas emerge – and how this might shape our study of international politics. Second, it hints at the affective ties we create with the subjects we study. We build affinities with historical figures' words and actions (one way or another through moments of joy, frustration, ambivalence, indecipherability, and confusion). These musings are more than a tangential indulgence. As Hutchings (2023) has argued, continued reflexivity and epistemic humility makes us attentive to how the relationship between knowers (us), historical thinkers, and the worlds in which they and we are bound up hold significant value for our international theorising.

With this imaginative leap as my starting point, this short essay serves as a reflective companion piece that builds on my recent article on Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (Balaji 2023) – an itinerant global political thinker and one of twentieth-century India's foremost political leaders – and her international thought.

Owens and Rietzler (2021, 1) set out an expansive definition of international thought as a 'reflection on the relations between peoples, empires, and states.' Their insights follow two decades of productive scholarship in the sub-field of historical international thought at the interplay between history and IR, which have opened up crucial debates on who counts as an international thinker (Vitalis 2017) and what counts as international thought (Shilliam 2010). In this landscape, the Women and the History of International Thought (WHIT) project has asked the International Relations (IR) discipline transformative questions about the value and stakes of taking seriously the constitutive role of gendered and racialised intellectual knowledge production (Owens and Hutchings 2021; Owens and Rietzler 2021; Hutchings 2023). Coterminously, Getachew's (2019) *Worldmaking after Empire* has offered pathways, alongside works of other political theorists of empire and race (Pitts 2010; Goswami, 2012; Getachew and Mantena, 2021; Bayly 2022), to recast anticolonial nationalists and Black intellectuals as world-makers – equal participants who shaped the twentieth-century international order.

Yet, Third World activist women have been curiously absent from this conversation (see recent works by Parr 2021; Singh Rathore 2021; Sajed and Salem 2023). Making this observation leads to an oft-repeated question: what are the stakes of taking seriously anticolonial activist women's thought (in my case, Kamaladevi) for IR?

At this point, I go back to my imagined dinner conversation with Kamaladevi. Preoccupied with my research, I ask her what she thinks of the state of (and indeed, her status within) International Relations. Now, I cannot be sure – but I would wager that she might say "what in the world is IR, let's get on with the real work!" If anything, our perceived marginality of Kamaladevi's thought within the discipline of IR (and attempts to 'bring her in') might obscure a far more interesting question. Which is: how do we make sense of the marginality of the *discipline* of IR in Kamaladevi's activism and political life? In the space below, I zoom into how Kamaladevi's sustained commitment to activist knowledge rooted in the micro-politics of struggle with the aim of societal reconstruction (*contra* university-based disciplinary writing) might help us unsettle 'hardened categories of political thought,' (Bayly 2015, 607) namely the

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implicit binaries of social/political and colonial/postcolonial in our scholarly work. Her expansive call for societal change, which stretched across both sides of India's colonial divide (in 1947) connected a critique of social relations of gender, class, and imperial political economic relations, which in turn allows us to see how the 'social' and 'political' are intertwined in her work and where anticolonial nationalism ends – and the interests of the postcolonial state begin.

Kamaladevi developed and deployed intellectual ideas in and through her social activism, which originated in the everyday, micropolitics of struggle and service. Her view was that social work was a professional skill to be developed rather than a 'leisure time activity based in compassion and goodwill' as her family saw it (Chattopadhyay 1986, 51). Her social work degree at Bedford College, UK (1921) involved voluntary work at London's East End. This formative experience with her position as an elite mobile young Indian woman—nonetheless viewed as an imperial subject in the metropole— hierarchically higher up than the 'wild urchins' to whom she was offering service (Chattopadhyay 1986, 51 in Balaji 2023) reveals the unevenness of our categories of who gets to know whom and on what terms. The specificity of her experience in London would set her on a life-long path of viewing social work as a vocation, her life's purpose and a means to societal reconstruction (Chattopadhyay, 1986).

Her insistent analysis of how (competing) political ideologies of imperialism, nationalism, and socialism related to reconstructive social efforts was rooted in a keen understanding of social relations of gender, class, race, and imperial political economy. In the early 1920s, she remarked that 'a new pattern of living would have to be evolved' in the aftermath of the first World War that had caused 'the utter collapse of the fabric of society' (Chattopadhyay 1986, 53 in Balaji 2023). Her subsequent books and articles expanded her ideas on this 'new pattern of living,' including radical commentary on the need to accept '[the] housewife as a distinct economic entity' as making invaluable contributions to the political economy (Chattopadhyay, 1948); a critical analysis of colonial powers' assertion on whether or not colonies had begun to become liabilities for ruling countries post the 1940s, where she brought out Britain's complete dependence on India's economy within the Commonwealth (Chattopadhyay, nd), and finally her prediction that Africa was soon becoming the 'White man's military and economic base' once Britain 'liquidates its empire' (Dubois and Lal, 2017, 252) to give a few examples. Thus, her writings urged both her political contemporaries and the general public to view questions of race, empire, gender, and political economy as intimately interlinked rather than as disparate concerns.

Her call for societal change far exceeded the limited – albeit what was to her the hugely significant – call for Indian independence. In this regard, one of the central questions of my article was: what do we make of the remnants of political possibilities imagined by anticolonial activists, that were lost in the consolidation of postcolonial statehood? What political paradoxes persisted and were carried out in other ways? (Balaji 2023). Scholars have mostly studied knowledge produced in 'colonial' and 'postcolonial' South Asia as separate – with 1947 as an analytical and political 'dividing line' or point of rupture (see: Raghavan et al. 2021). The reification of this rupture means that scholars have missed out on the exciting and unsettling political possibilities that persisted on either side of this divide – and some that were jettisoned– due to their perceived 'idealism' or impracticability with India's place in the postcolonial sovereign state-based international order.

In my research, I situate Kamaladevi's political thought on either side of the colonial/postcolonial divide as a continuation rather than a break-away from her earlier political ideals (Balaji 2023). Kamaladevi is quick to criticise remnants of British colonial legacies of disciplinary and punitive tactics against dissent being used by the burgeoning Indian state and asks: 'what is this new state we are building up, fondly designating it as a free democratic India?' (Chattopadhyay, 1949). Moved by her close socialist comrade, Dr Rammanohar Lohia's detention along with 50 other prisoners for a peaceful demonstration against the partition of India, she wrote a polemic pamphlet addressed to India's then Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. She said, 'Socialist gangsters like Dr Lohia and wild troupe of street urchins who shout slogans in front of friendly embassies and jeopardise our international prestige... they should be cooing diplomacy at ambassadorial receptions, [instead] they go straying into bleak villages and stir up the listless villagers' (Chattopadhyay, 1949). Thus, scholars of anticolonial political thought can benefit from breaking out of a clear anticolonial/postcolonial separation in their works through which we might find interesting alternative formulations and resistance to (hegemonic) postcolonial states through civil-society activist leaders.

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Although her polemic pamphlet is heavily laced with irony, the latter half of Kamaladevi's own life went in exactly that direction. She abandoned offers of bureaucratic positions and prominent government roles to refocus her attention on civil-society activism and the revival of indigenous handicrafts (Chattopadhyay 1986, 328-9). In the 1970s, American feminist and social-political activist, Gloria Steinem and Kamaladevi met and forged a friendship (DuBois and Lal 2017). Decades later, Steinem reflected on the conversations they shared. She recalled Kamaladevi's criticism of the schoolbook convention of teaching "the Great Man Theory of History" as Kamaladevi remarked to Steinem about "the politics of history and history writing, which enabled the erasures of civil-resistance and mass-scale protest tactics women had used for centuries, so much so that we didn't know the tactics we were drawn to were our own" (DuBois and Lal 2017, xiii).

Kamaladevi's prescient questioning of 'The Great Man Theory of History' is telling. She was at least by the latter half of her life, wholly aware of the deprivileging of activist knowledge within the consolidation of modern disciplinary knowledge systems. In her memoirs, *Inner Recesses, Outer Spaces* (Chattopadhyay, 1986), she reflected on her academic degree in Social Work at Bedford College (1921) by saying, "luckily sociology had not then become a *discipline* to turn into a bookish affair, as now" (Chattopadhyay, 1986, 51 emphasis in original). Taking seriously the activist origins of anticolonial women's international thought and in turn provincializing disciplinary binaries of social/political, local/international, and colonial/postcolonial is essential to the task of how we examine Third World activist women as serious political actors and thinkers on their own terms. This in turn might give us what Duncan Bell (2019, 12) has powerfully argued as a 'counter-canon of... a disparate range of thinkers who provide alternative ways of seeing the world and a repertoire of theoretical and conceptual resources to think through questions of global order.'

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