

**“Women who lead: Pages from an Indian Story”**

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Professor Tom Kailath, Dr. Anu Maitra, Professor Lawrence Cohen, members of the Kailath family, dear friends :

My husband and I are deeply honored and privileged to be present here today. I am particularly privileged to have been asked to deliver the third Sarah Kailath Memorial Lecture. I know that Sarah was a remarkable presence in your lives and that she exemplified the spirit of kindness and giving, loved and admired by her family and friends, a true personification of infinite grace and courage. Her memory is an inspiration for all of us who seek to bridge east and west, India and America, blending the best of both our civilizations in the lives we lead, as Sarah did through the power of her uplifting and abiding love and compassion for all the lives she touched.

Madeleine Albright once said, "For democracy to thrive without women is impossible. If women are undervalued or underdeveloped then that democracy is imperfect and incomplete." The story of the lives of the three Indian women I will speak of today demonstrates the power of example, of a will to question conventional beliefs and stereotypes with rational eloquence, to shoulder immense burdens through their lives as they sought the achievement of their goals, to work for social justice, and to exert their utmost in the causes of peace and freedom. I thought I should refer to the examples of these women because there is much debate today about the parlous state of Indian womanhood and that we the woman of India, are the victims of voiceless-ness and invisibility.

Be that as it may, the trinity of women who will be in focus in today's talk remains as revolutionary and path-breaking today as it was, sixty years ago when we emerged as a young democracy consolidating our nationhood. The roads they travelled, the gulfs they bridged, the authorities they challenged, make their story educative and inspirational. Their lives reflect the fact that at the core of the idea of India there is an imagination that is inclusive, progressive and visionary.

The curtain on my story today rises at the turn of the twentieth century with the birth of three women protagonists: Hansa Mehta, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit (or Madame Pandit, as she was known internationally) and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay. The epithet "Great Lady" or, "woman of the century" applies to each one of them. They were the genuine, pure

and soaring voices of Indian womanhood. In their lives, each of them epitomized the translation into concrete doing of Gandhiji's clarion call: "India cannot be free until its women are free and women cannot be free until India is free". Hansa Mehta, from the state of Gujarat, rose through the ranks of our freedom struggle to become a member of India's first Constituent Assembly and a member of the first U.N. Human Rights Commission charged with the drafting of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, the first ever woman in the world to be Ambassador to the Soviet Union, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and the President of the United Nations General Assembly, and Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, who historian Ramachandra Guha aptly calls the "greatest Indian woman of the twentieth century". In each of these women, the elements of feminism, nationalism and internationalism combined with such balance and equilibrium that we can hold up each example to the world and say "this was a woman!" The words that the novelist Raja Rao used to describe Kamaladevi, can be applied to each of them: they were "firmly Indian and therefore universal, highly sophisticated both in sensibility and intelligence" and that they walked "with everyone in city and country with utter simplicity".

### **"A Gift from the Women of India"**

I will begin with Hansa Mehta. An active participant in Mahatma Gandhi's satyagraha campaigns from 1930 onwards, she began her public life as a social worker and educationist. She was one of the women members of the first Constituent Assembly of India from before Partition, and later a Member of India's first Parliament. She served as a member of the first United Nations Human Rights Commission, and later on the Executive Board of UNESCO. As Vice-Chancellor of Baroda University, she was the first woman in India to be the head of a University that was not exclusively for women.

The early twentieth century was not the best time to be an Indian woman. Child marriage, female illiteracy and taboos on widow remarriage were the order of the times. But Hansa Mehta was treading a different path, and showing, by example, what that "difference" meant. She graduated from school and college with outstanding proficiency, and went on to study journalism in London. She married, at what was

for that time, the ripe old age of twenty five, a man outside her caste, for love. She plunged into educational work, and was one of the founders of the All India Women's Conference in 1927 whose demand for a minimum age of marriage for girls saw the Sarda Act of 1929. Here was a woman who left her young children in the care of their father to join the agitation surrounding Gandhi's Salt March of 1930, picketing foreign cloth and liquor shops. Imprisoned three times, while in jail she translated Shakespeare's Hamlet and The Merchant of Venice into Gujarati. In 1937, she became Parliamentary Secretary for Health in the Bombay Presidency with authority over her husband, who was then in charge of Bombay's largest hospital. In 1946, she appeared before the Cripps Commission on behalf of the women of India and from 1946 to 1952 she served with Eleanor Roosevelt on the United Nations Human Rights Commission. All in all, she was as the British newspaper, The Guardian, described her in 1966, "a formidably accomplished woman", a "genuine pioneer".<sup>1</sup>

At the cusp of India's Independence, at that dawn of a new chapter in the nation's history, it was bliss to be alive, and Indian. India's profile on the world stage was an indisputably prominent one, given its position at the forefront of the tectonic shift towards decolonization and the end of Empire. And women like Hansa Mehta were in the lead to provide this vision of a new India. She had already established for herself a reputation as a outspoken crusader for women's rights and emancipation. She had spoken out against purdah and that "any evil practiced in the name of religion cannot be guaranteed by the constitution". And in New York, she was the one who persuaded Eleanor Roosevelt that Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights should read not "All men are born free and equal" but "All human beings are born free and equal" – expressing disagreement with Mrs. Roosevelt's assertion that the word 'men' was generally accepted to mean all human beings.<sup>2</sup>

In her work at the United Nations, Mehta looked beyond a non-justiceable Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Speaking in 1949, she said: "the General Assembly of the United Nations.. passed the first

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<sup>1</sup> "Brahmin Pioneer", Zinkin, Taya, The Guardian, Dec. 28, 1966

<sup>2</sup> "Indian Sisters are Doing it for Themselves", French, Patrick, The New Statesman, July 21, 2011

part of the International Bill of Human Rights viz. the Declaration of Human Rights...The Human Rights Commission have still to prepare the Covenant of Human Rights which will be a legal document".<sup>3</sup> She was clear that this should be the eventual goal of any international effort to establish a globally justiceable platform for Human Rights. Geo-politics of course intervened to block any easy passage of such a covenant. But working in the Fundamental Rights Subcommittee of the Constituent Assembly of India, Mehta was focused in ensuring that the chapter on Fundamental Rights in India's Constitution should be a legal document and that "The rights as defined in that chapter are justiceable rights".<sup>4</sup> India had thus "embedded" (Bhagavan) the Declaration into "its national synthesis" (ibid). It demonstrated the global vision of pioneers like Mehta as well as their constant awareness of India's connectedness with the larger world, and its sense of obligating itself to global standards of accountability on human rights. Today Mehta is also seen as having "made sure the Declaration (on Human Rights) spoke with power and clarity about equal rights for women well before they were recognized in most legal systems."<sup>5</sup> In the words of Gita Sahgal, by ensuring that the wording of Article I of the Declaration read "All human beings are equal in dignity and rights" and arguing that if the word men was used, it would not be regarded as inclusive but rather taken to exclude women, she became the key figure who ensured gender equality in the document.<sup>6</sup> It was perspective honed during the freedom struggle when India's new generation of women spoke of not turning women into imitations of men but insisting on equal status and opportunity so as to achieve for women "the possibility of development under favorable circumstances of education and opportunity. We would like to displace (as they said) the picture so deeply impressed upon the racial imagination, of man striding forward to conquer new worlds, woman following wearily behind with a baby in her arms. The picture which we now envisage is that of man and woman, comrades of the road, going

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<sup>3</sup> Quoted in "A New Hope: India, the United Nations and the Making of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights", Bhagavan, Manu, Modern Asian Studies 44,2 (2010)

<sup>4</sup> Bhagavan, ibid

<sup>5</sup> "A World Made New: Eleanor Roosevelt and The Universal Declaration on Human Rights" by Mary Ann Glendon

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.opendemocracy.net/5050/gita-sahgal/who-wrote-universal-declaration-of-human-rights>

forward together, the child joyously shared by both. Such a reality, we feel, cannot but raise the manhood and womanhood of any nation.”<sup>7</sup>

Mehta, like others in her cohort, was not seeking crumbs or leftovers. She was not asking for privileges but for social justice, economic justice and political justice. She sought that equality which, as she said in words that are as relevant today as they were sixty years ago, can alone be the basis of mutual respect and understanding and without which real cooperation is not possible between man and woman.

This segment on Hansa Mehta will not be complete without a reference to her role during that midnight of the 14<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> August, 1947 when free India was born. She, on behalf of the women of India, presented the flag of the newly independent country to the President of the Constituent Assembly, Rajendra Prasad with these historic words, which bear quoting in full:

*“It should be in the fitness of things that the first flag that should fly over this august House should be a gift from the women of India. (cheers) We have donned the saffron color, we have fought, suffered and sacrificed in the cause of our country’s freedom. We have today attained our goal. In presenting this symbol of our freedom we once more offer our services to the nation. We pledge ourselves to work for a great India for building up a nation that will be a nation among nations. We pledge ourselves for working for a greater cause to maintain the freedom that we have attained.. May this flag be the symbol of that great India and may it fly high in the gloom that threatens the world today. May it bring happiness to those who live under its protective care. (cheers)”<sup>8</sup>*

### **“Sophisticated, sleek, silvery”**

The second heroine in my story, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit was one of the most admired women in international political life of her times. Her success in overwhelming with charm, erudition and eloquence the

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<sup>7</sup> “Women’s Resurgence: The Gandhi-Nehru Alchemy”, Asaf Ali, Aruna, Mainstream Weekly, Vol LI, No. 23, May 25,

<sup>8</sup> “Selected Speeches of Women Members of the Constituent Assembly”, New Delhi, Rajya Sabha Secretariat, April 2012; it is also to be noted that the final design of the flag as adopted by the Constituent Assembly was one prepared by a Hyderabad Muslim woman, Surayya Tyabji then only 28 years old.

formidable propaganda machine of the British empire during her lecture tour of America following the death in prison of her husband, Ranjit Pandit, in the mid-nineteen forties caused the acid-tongued Lady Astor to remark that “if the British had not been in India that woman would have been burnt on her husband’s funeral pyre”. When she died in 1990, the obituary in one British newspaper said, “The international career of the diminutive Mrs. Pandit –sophisticated, sleek, silvery and swathed in silks –was unmatched in her time”.<sup>9</sup>

There can be little doubt that Madame Pandit – as she was universally referred to – was the most effective and perhaps, most affectionately regarded woman diplomat of her century. In 1949, as Ambassador of India to the United States, while being conferred an honorary degree by Dr. Mordecai Johnson, president of Howard University, the latter said: “You were born to wealth and station but... when you lifted up your voice in behalf of the dependent peoples....you made yourself the dear Ambassador to the hearts of millions of human beings who never saw your native land but will henceforth love you and look toward you with hope.”<sup>10</sup>

Born into the lap of luxury, the young Swarup as she was called, wanted for nothing in her growing up years. But the freedom struggle changed her life and that of her family’s. Prison and the sacrifice of family life became a part of her existence as also long periods spent away from her three young daughters. Her husband’s death in prison in 1943 left her income-less and it was in those circumstances that the world of diplomacy unexpectedly opened up for her. Riding an American transport plane to the United States, without a passport since the British had denied her one, she was a forty four year old widow in a strange and foreign country without any preparation for what lay ahead.

But overnight, things changed. She became the propagandist for an India that had not had a voice in America before that. The British were going all out to present Gandhi as “dangerously erratic” and Nehru as “the Hamlet of India, a high-minded but ineffective aristocrat dabbling

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<sup>9</sup> “Obituary, Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit: India, silk or steel”, Zinkin, Taya and C.P.D. in The Guardian, December 4, 1990

<sup>10</sup> “A Lamp for India: The Story of Madame Pandit”, Andrews, Robert Hardy, Prentice Hall, Inc. , 1967 (p. 12)

in politics” – and here was Mrs. Pandit embarking on a lecture tour of America speaking on the theme of “Why India Wants Independence” and “What Kind of a Postwar World?” Suddenly, she was a Page One figure. Her daughter, Nayantara spoke thus of her mother: “She had a flair for human relationships and attracted people like a magnet. She lived with a robustness of response and a generosity of gesture”. The Americans were fascinated. <sup>11</sup>

At the San Francisco United Nations Conference in 1945 again she dazzled audiences even though she headed no official delegation but represented the India League of America and the Committee for Indian Freedom. Her statements about India, about democracy, her speech at the California legislature at Sacramento made her eclipse the official Indian delegation with news reports describing her as “dainty and deft, with the velocity of the wind, that rides roughshod over all obstacles”. <sup>12</sup> Mrs. Pandit’s focus at the San Francisco had been to seek an early termination of colonialism. At the time of inception of the United Nations that struggle had not been fully won. But by the time, Mrs. Pandit was called upon to lead the Indian delegation to the United Nations in 1946, there was already an interim Government in Delhi, headed by Jawaharlal Nehru. The issue of immediate urgency for the delegation was the treatment of Indians in South Africa, a matter that the South Africans argued was within their domestic jurisdiction and not therefore to be inscribed on a UN agenda. The Indians argued differently : after all human rights were fundamental for all mankind, they were advocated in the UN Charter and therefore South Africa stood in violation of the very basis on which the United Nations had been founded.<sup>13</sup>

Mrs. Pandit was “pitch-perfect” in her delivery and veteran observers were bowled over when she spelt out India’s vision for the United Nations and to follow the Charter in spirit and letter of which South Africa stood in violation of. She was brilliant and “emotionally electric” in weaving together “a narrative of tragedy” concerning the Indians of South Africa, receiving rave notices from even the normally hard-to-

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<sup>11</sup> *ibid*, (p. 212,214,)

<sup>12</sup> *ibid* (p.219)

<sup>13</sup> “India and the Quest for One World, The Peacemakers”, Bhagavan, Manu, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013 (p.57)



impress The New York Times. She did not rant, she was reasonable and humane. In the United States, where her previous tour had won her many admirers, including the NAACP and the singer, Paul Robeson she had many voices raised in her support. When the South Africans derided Indian culture and customs with crude insults and talked about defending a “superior” Christian civilization, she ripped them apart by saying that according to extant South African laws, even Jesus Christ would be a prohibited immigrant in the South Africa of the nineteen forties. Her appeal, neither aggressive or humble, (wiping a “fortuitous tear” from her eye) was on behalf of all the voiceless people as she termed it who had been denied justice for centuries on grounds of creed and color. When India won the vote against South Africa in the General Assembly, Nehru said that the “new India” had made “a most auspicious beginning” on the stage of international politics. Mrs. Pandit had played a leading part in that campaign and her diplomatic skills were shown to be of the highest order. As a result of India’s efforts, the international community was now committed to the defence of human rights and fundamental freedoms. India’s efforts to protest discrimination against Indians in South Africa proved to be the thin end of the wedge that prised open the door for the UN to go on to discuss all of South Africa’s racial policies.<sup>14</sup>

When she was asked by her brother, the Prime Minister to go to Moscow as India’s first Ambassador to the Soviet Union, Mrs. Pandit was told by both orthodox Hindus and Muslims that “Ambassador is not job for a woman”. She, who loved challenges, immediately rose to the occasion. She told her brother “All right. I’ll go. I’ll do the best I can”. The Indian press said that “this little lady” could “hold the scene in Russia” even if “Napoleon and Hitler got lost on the steppes”, since “she was not going as an invader”. Ironically, since the Republic of India still did not exist when she arrived in Moscow on August 5, 1947, ten days before Independence, her letter of credence was signed by King George VI referring to the “special trust and confidence in the discretion and faithfulness of our Trusty and Well-Beloved the Honorable Madame Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, a person of approved Wisdom, Loyalty, Diligence and Circumspection”.

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<sup>14</sup> “A Most Auspicious Beginning, the 1946 United Nations General Assembly and the Question of Treatment of Indians in South Africa”, Lloyd, Lorna: Review of International Studies, Vol. 16, No. 2 (April 1990)

In May 1949, she became India's first woman Ambassador to the United States, a country that knew her well, already. When asked by a woman journalist on arrival: "Tell me, Mrs. Pandit, how does it feel to be World Feminist Number One?", she said, "I am not a 'feminist'. As far as I can see, the question of being male or female has nothing to do with the duty of both sexes to take their part in world affairs." In America, much to her concern, the media took an inordinate interest in her coiffure ( a type...most women dream of, but seldom achieve"), her pastel sarees, her Great Lady elegance, as if, as she said, "I were a visitor from Hollywood". But she was immensely quotable wherever she went as when she was asked whether she had any university degrees and answered that she held none, adding "In India 'So and So was in prison with me' is another way of saying 'We were at Oxford together'." But she was again pitch-perfect in her defence of India's positions on Kashmir, on non-alignment, on her country's support for the admission of China to the United Nations and she began to be listened to by Americans, "as they would listen to a man".<sup>15</sup> Here in San Francisco in 1949, speaking to the League of Women Voters, she lamented the lack of constructive thinking for peace in the world and the need for a merging of the East and West in the quest for a formula for peace which would involve an end of discrimination and colonial rule, and opportunities for backward people. In this context, let us also recall her famous words : "The more we sweat in peace, the less we bleed in war".

Writing a profile of her in September 1953, on the eve of her assumption of duties as the first woman President of the U.N. General Assembly, "The Observer" had this to say about the "paradox" in Mrs. Pandit's reputation. It referred to the fact that while she was an ardent champion of the rights of Asian and African peoples , "she has none of the assertiveness derived from a feeling of inferiority which so often accompanies this attitude: she treats Americans and British with genuinely effortless equality. She has refused utterly to join the anti-communist camp, yet her political outlook is without that radical fervor which distinguishes her brother the Premier, Jawaharlal Nehru.. She has feminine charm... yet she has contested the toughest American and Russian diplomats, emerging always unruffled and usually victorious...

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<sup>15</sup> Andrews, Robert Hardy, *ibid.* (p.272)

There is probably no one better able to deal with the spokesmen of the great Powers than this determined and gifted lady, whose life has taught her to understand the politics of revolution, the responsibilities of administration, and the possibilities and impossibilities of modern diplomacy".<sup>16</sup> What made her unique was her sense of proportion, her ability to rise above hatred, her embrace of freedom as that "magic word" that could make her soar above the smallness of the divisive and mundane.

### **Rooted cosmopolitanism: shaking the world, gently**

My narrative about Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay begins on a train in racially segregated Louisiana in 1941. Visiting the state while on an extended tour of the United States as a single mother with her teenage son, she was asked to vacate her seat on the train by the conductor. Kamaladevi was unmoved, saying to the conductor that "I am a colored woman...and it is unnecessary for you to disturb me for I have no intention of moving from here." After some toing and froing the conductor muttered, "You are an Asian" and did not bother her again. But like Rosa Parks, some fourteen years later, Kamaladevi had stood her ground. Standing her ground was a leitmotif that described Kamaladevi, throughout her distinguished life.

When she passed away in 1988, the then President of India, R. Venkataraman referred to Kamaladevi as "an invisible Saraswati, invisible, but no less real; no less benevolent. She was a Ganga in purity and power...Flower buds seemed to blossom at her touch – whether they be flower buds of human beings or institutions. ..Two interests never missed her eye. One was human justice and the other was human creativity or self-expression. In fact, her entire life was a continuous dialogue with either questions of justice or creativity. And the fields she covered, political, social, aesthetic – and the purely human-were imbued by these twin interests: justice and creativity...The idiom of Gandhiji's movement coalesced with the poetry of Kamaladevi's sensibility"<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> "Profile –Mrs. Pandit", The Observer, September 20, 1953

<sup>17</sup> "TRIBUTE: A many splendoured life", R. Venkataraman, India International Centre Quarterly, Vol. 15, No. 3 (MONSOON 1988)

Kamaladevi's life epitomized the quintessential values of a feminism shot through and through with glorious humanism. She was President of the Youth Congress at the age of 26, in 1929; on January 26, 1930, she captured the imagination of the entire nation when in a scuffle she clung to the Tricolor in order to protect it. As lathis rained on her she stood like a rock to protect the Flag. Defying the stereotype of the Indian woman as a timid and helpless bundle of nerves, in April 1930, she was one of the two women chosen to defy the Salt Law at Bombay. She convinced Gandhiji to see the logic of women's participation in the Salt Satyagraha: in her words, "The significance of a non-violent struggle is that the weakest can take an equal part with the strongest and share in the triumph as you have yourself said. This struggle is ideally suited for them." In the police attack on the people making salt on portable stoves at the Chowpaty Sands, she received a lathi blow on her back, fell on the blazing coals and received burn injuries. Gopalkrishna Gandhi referred in a recent article to the black and white footage of her "fanning a pot of boiling saltwater", and each vapor diminishing "a wisp of imperial hubris".<sup>18</sup> It is said of her that her inner core made her not only a doer but a thinker. Her love of the arts defined her, too. Her work in theatre (she was a gifted actress), the trade union sector, her efforts to secure for women the right to maternity leave, respect and recognition for their work in the household as homemakers, and her concern for the welfare of women workers was pioneering and path-breaking.

Referred to often, in her youth as 'the uncrowned queen of India', she combined beauty, sharpness of intellect, staunchness of conviction, courage, commitment and grace. In the annals of India's freedom movement, Kamaladevi came to symbolize a whole climate of progressive opinion. In the words of Kapila Vatsayan, "For Kamaladevi, life was an integrated whole – the hand, the heart and the mind, and an unflinching commitment went together. .. she eschewed power, position, explicit political leadership..it was the mission of alleviating the suffering of the people which was her calling."<sup>19</sup> Her calling was public

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<sup>18</sup> "A Song Sung True", Gandhi, Gopalkrishna, [humanitiesunderground.org/a-song-sung-true/](http://humanitiesunderground.org/a-song-sung-true/)

<sup>19</sup> Vatsayan, Kapila, Foreword to the Fourth Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay Memorial Lecture, March 2014, Centre for Cultural Resources and Training, New Delhi ([http://ccrtindia.gov.in/downloads/other/Lecture\\_4\\_pro\\_bharat\\_Booklet.pdf](http://ccrtindia.gov.in/downloads/other/Lecture_4_pro_bharat_Booklet.pdf))

service, not public office, and her political interests developed into social interests. She became *Hastkala Mata* – the mother of handicraft - , rescuing women after Partition, doing grassroots level work to promote the recognition of Indian handlooms and handicrafts, giving dignity and value to the products of our artisans. She introduced the world to the many-splendored universe of Indian crafts – and she 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”.<sup>20</sup>

The Mexican poet and diplomat, Octavio Paz once said ‘Kamaladevi’s mind is an ocean’<sup>21</sup>, an oceanic ‘heart’, which could contain “a thousand sorrows, regrets, aspirations –not just her own but those of others as well”<sup>22</sup>. Her gift for ‘identification’ helped her be a part of every corner of India that she was in. And, she was both an active player and an engaged witness in the momentous passage of modern Indian history in the twentieth century. In her own words: “I can talk of some of the significant events and some of the personalities not as distant historical figures cast on an imaginary screen but as part of my own life and my own contemporaries with whom I shared some of the adventures, hopes, fears, sorrow and from whom I drew inspiration, sustenance, above all, warm companionship”. Above all, she became an authentic voice of Indian womanhood, and a voice for peace and dialogue. Her comment on Robert Oppenheimer quoting the Gita when the first nuclear explosion was conducted in New Mexico stands out in this regard: “Will the pious Hindus who recite the Gita heed this and await Krishna’s coming with a Sudarshan Chakra transformed by modern bhaktas, the nuclear scientists, into a nuclear weapon, to bring about the long predicted global pralaya?”.

The noted Gandhian scholar and cooperative worker L.C. Jain called Kamaladevi a karmayogi saying : “she spent a life-time, filling the voids around her.” And that “To her the concrete expressions of human rights were the means for an autonomous, dignified and

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<sup>20</sup> R. Venkataraman, *ibid*

<sup>21</sup> “Shining Stars of the firmament”, Dhamija, Jasleen, [http://www.india-seminar.com/2011/628/628\\_jasleen\\_dhamija.htm](http://www.india-seminar.com/2011/628/628_jasleen_dhamija.htm)

<sup>22</sup> R. Venkataraman, *ibid*

creative life – as land could provide to the tillers, factory to the workers and yarn to the handloom weavers. She must be an inspiration, not for the successes that she was able to grasp, but for the pursuit of the unaccomplished tasks of India's second revolution to which she dedicated herself with all her heart and soul".<sup>23</sup>

From her early days in the freedom movement, Kamaladevi was concerned with the role of women in a modern society. In her view, the women's movement "does not seek to make women either fight men or imitate them. It rather seeks to instill into them a consciousness of their own faculties and functions and create a respect for those of the other sex. Thus alone can society be conditioned to accept the two as equals. To fit women theoretically and practically into this scheme, women have to be encouraged to develop their gifts and talents." She wanted a recognition also of the value of woman's economic worth. In her Presidential Address to the All India Women's Conference in 1944, she spoke of the tragedy of the non-pecuniary and non-competitive character of house-keeping by a wife as having lowered the prestige of the woman's role. In her words, "Husbands who claim they 'support' their wives simply because the latter do not bring home a pay cheque, are being anti-social, upsetting the harmonious social equilibrium and breaking social solidarity". It was high time society recognized that every housewife supported herself by the social labor she performed and the contribution she made towards the maintenance of the home and its happiness.<sup>24</sup> In this she was prepared even to take on Mahatma Gandhi. She was not in unison with Gandhiji's utilization of the symbolism of the self-sacrificing woman, Sita, Draupadi, Savitri, Damayanti in his writings. By the 1930s, Kamaladevi and other women activists had found their own voices, no longer in keeping with Gandhi's perspective. Giving expression to a new indignation, a new rage, and as a child widow herself (who married a second time, later, for love) she denounced for instance, the tendency in Indian families to marry off their girls very early. Over half of the girls were being married under the

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<sup>23</sup> "Kamaladevi: a Karmayogi", Jain, L.C., India International Centre Quarterly, Vol. 15, No. 3 (MONSOON 1988)

<sup>24</sup> Extract from a speech by Kamaladevi in "The Socialist Feminist: Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay" in "Makers of Modern India", Guha, Ramachandra, Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011

age of 15, she noted and said: "But these figures hardly indicate the enormity of the damage. These reports pass silently over the hundreds and thousands of young blossoming girls, wrecked for life physically and psychologically by forced premature motherhood. By all moral codes, it is rape but our social conscience is hard bound by dead old usages..So the murders and rape go on, while we sit and gloat over the past glories of the dead and gone Seetas and Savitris!"

Impressive too was Kamaladevi's stress on the cultural side of the daily needs of humankind, "the delicate creations in word, song and colour in which the dreams of mankind find expression". For her, the growth of crafts in society was the sign of the cultivation of sensitivity and the stirring and mellowing of humanism. She pointed to the importance of "cultural industries" long before the World Bank discovered the concept. She was alert to the need for preservation of traditional knowledge systems and bringing them to the global market. She was also concerned about the under-utilization of the labor of women. Writing in 1987, she said, "The main segment of the human community that stands out as calling for special attention is women, who have not in the past been treated as a rich source for building up society". Women resources were being used sub-optimally, women were conditioned by society to accept the second-grade in treatment, and they were not encouraged or facilitated in obtaining the skills necessary to contribute to economic growth of the country. She bemoaned the "lack of intelligent and purposeful guidance" relating to women. Importantly, she wanted young women to be trained for jobs in new technologies, which would "serve to bring them into the current mainstream, accustom them to a machine propelled world, inject into them greater self-confidence and use their native intelligence and ability to wider uses".<sup>25</sup> This was the second revolution that India needed, one to which she dedicated her own self with unparalleled commitment and dedication.

The inner core of this fascinating woman is revealed also by her world-view. Speaking in the nineteen forties, well before the enunciation of independent India's foreign policy, she drew attention to the fact that

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<sup>25</sup> "The Real Issues Facing Women", Chattopadhyay, Kamaladevi, Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 22, No. 12 (Mar. 21, 1987)

India's "insular peninsular outline" had "widened into the global, with an increasing awareness that we and the rest of the world are but part of a single sphere, that our destinies are inevitably linked, our paths interlocked...It is not idle curiosity or cheap sentiment which shapes the question that haunts and harasses every diplomat like a family ghost: 'What about India?' We may well say 'Everything'... India is more than a test, it is a symbol. It is the mirror in which the world sees the shape of things to be...It is towards a world which recognizes the right of every nation to determine and rule its own destiny but in a cooperative world order, that the women of India and of the world have to strive for, if humanity is ever to enjoy decency, peace and happiness.."<sup>26</sup>

I hope that these examples of the leadership that women can personify and expound will be as enlightening and inspiring for you as they have been for me in my personal journey. Hansa, Vijaya Lakshmi and Kamaladevi : these shining lodestars in my firmament, have taught me that challenges exist to be challenged, that feminism does not mean the exclusion of men, that India can never be isolated from the world, that the insularity of a closed mind is to be fought against, that freedom is a sacred word. In conclusion, I dedicate my words to the founding mothers of India whose battles were hard fought and whose struggle we must carry on. We will never walk alone because they ensured we would not.

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<sup>26</sup> Kamaladevi in Ramachandra Guha, *ibid.*