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From Colonial Subjecthood to Shared Humanity: Social Work and the Politics of "Doing" in Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay's International Thought

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This article tracks a paradox in elite, Third-World thinkers' nation-building and postcolonial world-making in the early to mid-twentieth century. The tension lay in highly universalized notions of equality in imagined postcolonial worlds and the hierarchized social organizing tactics required to bring these worlds to life. The paper examines Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay—a prominent Indian social activist—and her international thought as she encountered this paradox in her social work praxis. I assess Kamaladevi's social work politics in the 1920s and 1930s at the Congress Seva Dal (a mass-based voluntary organization) as an imperial site where her universalized ideas about subjecthood clashed with practical disciplinary and hierarchical modes of political engagement. Then, I explore Kamaladevi's alienation from party politics in a newly independent India in the 1940s, which offered her an alternative pathway to leverage her social work as she built anticolonial solidarities at the substate level. Reading new archival material from Kamaladevi's travels in West Asia and parts of Africa in the 1950s–1960s, I suggest that her anti-imperial and race-conscious international thought in the "postimperial" world is a continuation rather than a breakaway from the earlier tensions of her normative and hierarchical civil–society activism. Kamaladevi's specific political trajectory that cuts across the Indian independence divide in 1947 is interesting in two ways. First, it problematizes hierarchies in historical elite Indian women's anticolonial and civil–society activism. Second, examining her social work allows for a disruptive reading of taken-for-granted binaries of the colonial/postcolonial, local/international, and social/political in historical international thought.

Cet article s'intéresse à un paradoxe au sein de la construction des nations et de la reconstruction postcoloniale de l'élite des penseurs du tiers-monde du début à la moitié du vingtième siècle. Cette tension transparaît dans les notions très universalisées d'égalité au sein des mondes postcoloniaux imaginés, mais aussi dans les tactiques d'organisation sociale hiérarchisées souvent nécessaires pour que ces mondes voient le jour. L'article étudie Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, figure importante du militantisme social indien, et sa pensée internationale quand elle a rencontré ce paradoxe dans le cadre de son travail social. J'envisage son militantisme social politique dans les années 1920 et 1930 au Seva Dal du Congrès (organisation bénévole de masse) tel un site impérial où ses idées universalisées sur la sujétion se sont heurtées aux modes disciplinaires pratiques et hiérarchisés d'engagement politique. Puis, je m'intéresse à la mise à l'écart de Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay de la politique de partis au sein d'une Inde indépendante depuis peu dans les années 1940. Elle a trouvé d'autres façons de mettre à contribution son travail social, en faisant naître des solidarités anticoloniales au niveau sous-national. En me fondant sur la lecture de nouveaux documents d'archives issus des voyages de Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay en Asie de l'Ouest et dans des régions d'Afrique lors des années 1950 et 1960, je soumets l'hypothèse que sa pensée internationale anti-impériale et sensible aux races dans le monde « post-impérial » s'inscrit dans la continuité, et non en opposition, des tensions qui caractérisaient plus tôt son militantisme contre une société civile normative et hiérarchique. La trajectoire politique propre à Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, qui passe outre les divisions créées par l'indépendance de l'Inde de 1947, rend sa pensée internationale intéressante à deux égards. Elle permet d'abord de problématiser les hiérarchies du militantisme de la société civile des femmes de l'élite indienne, puis de s'intéresser à un éventail plus large d'échanges politiques dans la société civile durant la période de décolonisation politique africaine et asiatique.

Este artículo sigue la pista de una paradoja en la construcción de la nación y la creación del mundo poscolonial por parte los pensadores de élite del Tercer Mundo de principios a mediados del siglo XX. La tensión radicaba en nociones altamente universalizadas de igualdad en mundos poscoloniales imaginados y en las jerarquizadas tácticas de organización social requeridas para dar vida a estos mundos. El artículo estudia a Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (una destacada activista social india) y su pensamiento internacional a medida que se encontró con esta paradoja en la práctica de su trabajo social. Evalúo la política de trabajo social de Kamaladevi de los años veinte y treinta del siglo pasado en el Congreso Seva Dal (una organización voluntaria de base) como sitio imperial donde sus ideas universalizadas sobre la subjetividad chocaron con los modos prácticos, disciplinarios y jerárquicos del activismo político. A continuación, exploro la alienación de Kamaladevi de la política de partidos en el marco de una India recientemente independizada en los años cuarenta. Ello le ofreció un camino alternativo para sacar partido de su trabajo social mientras construía solidaridades anticoloniales a nivel subestatal. Leyendo nuevo material de archivo de los viajes de Kamaladevi por Asia occidental y partes de África durante los años cincuenta y sesenta, sugiero que su pensamiento internacional, antiimperialista y con consciencia de raza, en el mundo «posimperial», es una continuación, y no una ruptura, de las tensiones previas en su activismo de sociedad civil normativo y jerárquico. La específica trayectoria política de Kamaladevi, que trasciende la división de la independencia india de 1947, es interesante por dos razones. Primero, problematiza jerarquías propias del activismo anticolonial y de sociedad civil llevado a cabo por mujeres indias pertenecientes a la élite histórica. Segundo, examinar su trabajo social permite una lectura disruptiva de los conceptos binarios colonial/poscolonial, local/internacional, y social/político, acríticamente asumidos en el pensamiento histórico internacional.

Author's note: All archival sources from the Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay Papers collections at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi are referenced as "KC Papers, NMML" in the paper.

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Introduction

Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (1903–1988) was a prominent Indian social and political activist born to an upper-caste, middle-class family in Mangalore in British colonial India. Equipped with a social work degree from England, Kamaladevi was a complex globe-trotting idealist political thinker. A founding member of the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), the socialist wing of the Indian Congress Party, she was also a member of the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC), a leading women's organization along with a cohort of modern Indian women engaged in swadeshi (the self-sufficiency movement) nationalist struggles. Kamaladevi's corpus of over twenty books and hundreds of articles address significant international political issues such as race and imperialism, democratic socialism, political economy, the status of women's rights, and political participation. These appeared in widely circulated Indian journals and newspapers such as *Modern Review*, *India Quarterly*, *Stri Dharma*, and *Economic and Political Weekly*. Then, in 1947, at the dawn of India's freedom, she quit active party politics, effectively ending her career with both the CSP and the Congress Party, "thus ending the expectation of this small band of idealists offering an alternative lead, throwing out new ideas, setting new directions for a new burgeoning state" (Chattopadhyay 1986, 328). Historians largely remember her post-1947 work as dedicated to the revival of tribal and indigenous arts and crafts and women's emancipation in line with her socialist ideology (1947–1988). However, the so-called halves of Kamaladevi's life and political thought, in tandem with the temporal colonial/postcolonial separation, pose a historical–political paradox.

The paradox concerns the tension between elite postcolonial leaders' imagined worlds rooted in abstract notions of equality and the often hierarchized social organizing tactics required to bring these worlds to life in the twentieth century. Taking this paradox[1] as a fruitful opening, this paper tracks one strand of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay's political project with its "alternative leads" for postcolonial India and asks what became of those ideas at the historical moment of and after political decolonization.

In doing so, the paper critically contributes to scholarship on historical Indian women's international political struggles (Rathore 2021; Jha 2022; Parr 2022) and global histories of anticolonial thought (Goswami 2012). Studies of historical Indian women's civil society activism have framed their contributions as shaping norms of liberal international society, such as at the United Nations (UN) or the League of Nations (Parr 2021) or how they built women's citizenship in India (Devenish 2021). While Parr (2021) has recently explored how British women's networks reproduced imperial power hierarchies that Indian women civil society activists countered (see also Sinha 2006), we need more critical accounts of elite anticolonial Indian women's international thought.

To examine this, I combine insights from gender and international histories of South Asia with recent works on twentieth-century anticolonial thinkers as world-makers (Getachew 2019). Through this move, I shift away from a focus on Indian women's anti-imperial contributions to an already existing liberal international society to contribute to a recent move in global histories of anticolonial thought that interrogates registers of "hierarchy and equality" (Bayly 2022b) within (post)colonial world-making. I build on previous works on Kamaladevi's socialist and gendered activism (Slate 2009; DuBois and Lal 2017; Devenish 2021) but differ in my reading of her social work to present a more critical perspective on her agency and power-laden utilization of social spaces. Rather than presenting her as an exceptional figure or as a "victim" at the margins of international politics, I examine Kamaladevi's social organizing to emphasize how epistemic registers of hierarchy, contradictions, and paradoxes played out within her political thought.

I unpack Kamaladevi's political project through imperial sites of social work and civil society organizing in the 1920s and 1930s, where she negotiated the tensions of universalistic ideals and rooted difference, a quintessentially modern yet anticolonial political concern. I read her social organizing as a part of larger early twentieth-century transformations within "new women's professions" as set out by Huber, Pietsch, and Rietzler (2019). Social organizing is specifically the imperial site at which we see how mass political mobilization of a larger public clashed with highly idealized notions of subjecthood. I then trace what happened to Kamaladevi's paradoxical political project from the 1920s and 1930s, arguing that fragments of her views on normative subjecthood extended beyond the nation-state and got transposed onto a "postimperial" space in the 1950s and 1960s.

Through this, the paper also extends conversations on the "decolonization moment" in South Asia and suggests that the ideological, normative, and political paths not taken in the postcolonial Indian state-building process teach us important lessons. A recent turn within scholarship has considered decolonization as a spectrum of political engagement and knowledge practices, ranging from practices of diplomacy (Davis and Thakur 2016; Khan and Sherman 2022) to rich below-the-state-level responses (Armstrong 2016). In this paper, I specifically show how Kamaladevi's post-1947 political engagement (as a breakaway from party politics) existed in a liminal space, simultaneously inside and outside traditional spheres of postcolonial knowledge exchanges. While her travels to Africa and West Asia have clear links to a pedagogical mission about the new Indian state, she nonetheless constructed a normative vision of anti-imperial solidarity that is at once pedagogical and hierarchical. This concrete site of world-making allows us to examine what becomes of imagined worlds across both sides of political decolonization without viewing it as a "rupture" (see also Raghavan et al. 2022).

I put forth two arguments through a reconstruction of Kamaladevi's thought and activism. First, I argue that Kamaladevi, through her social work, engaged in an experimental pedagogical mode of imagining and creating normative future postcolonial subjects. Kamaladevi's normative construction of subjecthood was a negotiation between the self (colonial subject) and the collective in service to an imagined postcolonial nation and society. According to her, the moral self could not be separated from material and social conditions in society—and this break in conscience led to societal degeneration. However, moral conscience could be gained or restored through reason. Hence, Kamaladevi's social work and organizing held a pedagogical mission to instruct/train subjects to serve society better. However, there was a gap between her idealistic view of a normative subjecthood in service of society and her on-ground practice of social work during the nationalist struggle in colonial India. Her social organizing as the leader of the women's wing at the Seva Dal (a grassroots voluntary organization) was suffused with hierarchies and the vision to create a national (Hindu) cultural unity. Ultimately, the self could be

[1] Rather than suggesting that this is an analytical paradox that needs to be "resolved," the paper is concerned with how it animates Kamaladevi's social action and international thought.

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sacrificed for societal transformation (in this case, the creation of the Indian nation). This perspective allowed Kamaladevi to use both disciplinary tactics and more affective pedagogies of care and kinship in her social work.

Second, while disillusioned with party politics in postindependence India, I argue that Kamaladevi leveraged her training as a social worker to continue building anticolonial solidarities at the substate level. Despite her disenchantment with the unrealized promises of postcolonial modernity, she repurposed her commitment to social work and extended her vision of subjecthood to a "shared humanity" across racial lines. I demonstrate her continued engagement in cultural knowledge exchanges on international affairs in a newly decolonized Afro-Asian world at the civil–society level through a reading of new archival resources on her journalistic writings from the 1950s and 1960s, particularly her ethnographic accounts and travelogues in West Asia and parts of Africa. However, her privileged position in "civil society" (Chatterjee 2010) did not allow her to fully embrace the commitment of the anti-imperial, race-conscious rhetoric she espoused in the 1940s–1960s. Instead, her engagement took on a more pedagogical turn, where her "worldliness" (in the form of knowledge and epistemic authority) served to simultaneously express her idealized normative solidarities and further India's more official foreign policy standing in a newly decolonized world.

The paper proceeds as follows. I first trace Kamaladevi's early intellectual formation within its historiographical context of modernity, gender, and subjecthood. I then assess Kamaladevi's social work politics at the Congress Seva Dal as an imperial site where her universalized ideas about subjecthood clashed with practical disciplinary and hierarchical modes of political engagement. In the third section, I examine how her alienation from the Congress party and the newly burgeoning Indian state in the 1940s allowed her to leverage her social activism in a "liminal space" in the 1950s–1960s within India's postcolonial engagements. In conclusion, I draw out the broad implications of taking Kamaladevi's social work praxis seriously.

Modernity, Gender, and Subjecthood in Late Colonial India

Late colonial British India provided a productive context within which anticolonial leaders considered questions of subjecthood. Partha Chatterjee argues that while for Kant and other western Enlightenment thinkers, their present was an escape from the past, for anticolonial thinkers in Asia and Africa, it was the present from which they needed to escape (Chatterjee 1997, 19–20). This escape came in the form of myriad imagined political and normative horizons. However, Chatterjee (1997) speaking of South Asians says, "Our Modernity" is necessarily ambiguous due to being "once-colonized," doubly so because South Asians considered incapable of becoming modern became deeply skeptical of "modern knowledge and modern regimes of power" (Menon 2010, 19). However, we must dare to be producers, not consumers of modernity, Chatterjee urges, calling back to India's nationalist struggle, with its many imaginings of modernity, both "courageous and inventive" (Chatterjee 1997, 20).

The "our" in our modernity that Chatterjee theorizes encompassed a normative and political male subject citizen (Menon 2010). This is unsurprising given the gendered distinctions of public/private and inside/outside within which Chatterjee operates. He argues that while the "material" outside was controlled by British colonial rule, the "inner" spiritual realm remained in control of nationalist (and other fragmented) imaginaries. As an extension, Chatterjee argues that the "women's question" could be resolved internally by male nationalist figures. Civilizational lines were drawn on gendered difference in colonial India—with gender equality becoming a key marker of modernity and progress. This created a bone of contention between white British men and Indian male nationalists (Sarkar and Sarkar 2008) with women being the target of social reform (abolition of widow immolation (*sati*), increase in the marriage age of consent, permitting widow remarriage, and so on) rather than as active participants in thinking through their own historical condition (Sangari and Vaid 1990).

The normative idealized "self/subjecthood" constructed as predominantly male placed elite women in colonial India in a double bind. Political participation and entry into public spaces were contingent on the idealized vision of womanhood and any "escape" (to stay with Chatterjee's phrasing) from both their colonial condition and (Hindu) patriarchy would have to contend with structural challenges such as *sati*, early and forced marriages, low mortality rates, lack of educational and employment opportunities, and a strict relegation to the home. In Kamaladevi's case, gender profoundly shaped her early life. Her first awakening was in colonial India when her father's property passed on to a distant male relative after his death and she was married off for the first time at the age of 11 years and was widowed by the time she was 13 years old. When Kamaladevi was encouraged to contest for the Madras Legislative Council elections in 1926 by Margaret Cousins, an Irish-born Indian nationalist, she was initially barred as she had no property in her name. Thus, gendered society had immediate consequences for her public political participation. According to Forbes, "escape" then was possible in only two ways for middle-class Indian women: first, a "harkening back to (often Hindu) revival of a glorious past (where women were revered and treated equally), or valorized sacrifice as 'goddesses or heroines' for their husbands, extended to civil society and the nation" (Forbes 1999, 189). A striking example of this was that Gandhi's clarion call to women to join the nationalist struggle during the civil disobedience movement in the 1920s was as "good wives and mothers," thus extending their role and duty outward from their homes to their nation (Loomba 2018).

New feminist histories of gender and South Asian anticolonial thought have challenged this binary reading of women positioned on the "victim-to-rebellious heroine" spectrum (Nair 1994; Sinha 2006; Ahluwalia 2010). We now know that elite Indian women moved from homes into the public sphere via professions such as teaching and social work (Devenish 2021, 41), which enabled them to articulate new political values in both the private and public realms from the 1910s (Sinha 2006; Parr 2021). Kamaladevi's early political aspirations can be situated within this broader political context and self-fashioning of the "new Indian woman" of that period. Scholars have also explored historical Indian women's domestic political participation through connections between British and South Asian feminisms produced by imperial ties (Sinha 2006; Mukherjee 2018). The same language of social reform that treated colonized Indian women as objects was used to set up women's organizations such as the AIWC, which dealt with "women's questions" but importantly created a space where women wrote, debated, and reimagined their collective futures, beyond the reformist agenda. For these women, questions of their subjecthood could not be deferred to a later point in

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history unlike for male nationalist leaders of their time (such as Nehru), for whom the "women's question" would resolve itself once Indian independence was achieved (Bandopadhyay 2016).

This paper explores Kamaladevi's political formation within the historiographical context highlighted above. I argue that grounding Kamaladevi's international thought in and through her social work politics offers one iteration[2] of the normative and pedagogical inflections of the paradoxes of anticolonial nation-building. In the remainder of the paper, I critically examine how despite Kamaladevi's sympathies to shared struggles of humanity, her epistemic paradox came from being embedded in the elite, necessarily hierarchical political project of national and future postcolonial modernity, while simultaneously espousing commitments to a socialist political project.

Early Formation of Kamaladevi's Social Work

Before exploring Kamaladevi's social work, I first examine Kamaladevi's early intellectual formation and the grounds on which she came to terms with her subjecthood. Kamaladevi's early life and subjecthood are important as it was in and through her racialized and gendered encounters with an imperial society that she developed her political analysis and social work praxis. I argue that she imagined her normative political project through a creative articulation of the individual and collective problem, with varying ideological influences such as democratic socialism, Marxism, gender, and humanistic perspectives offered by Tagore and Gandhi.

In her late teens, the "modern" education and training in England that eventually set Kamaladevi off on the path of social work in India also revealed her gendered imperial subjecthood to her. In the 1910s–1920s, elite Indians travelled abroad, to Japan, England, and the United States among other places, to build international knowledge practices and networks often tied to normative political horizons (Bayly 2022a). Kamaladevi, hailing from a family of considerable political clout on her mother's side, grew up listening to stories of nationalist struggle from political leaders such as Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Srinivasa Sastri at her maternal home (Chattopadhyay 1986). When she arrived at Cambridge University with her then-husband, Harindranath Chattopadhyay, she specifically requested "practical training" in sociology and social work to serve India and its nationalist struggle upon her return (Chattopadhyay 1986). She was promptly redirected to Bedford College, where the principal turned down her admission request. The "practical training" part of the sociology course at Bedford was to be in the East End of London, where Kamaladevi could not be allowed to go in that "weird garb" of hers as the alleys would be filled with "wild urchins" (Chattopadhyay 1986, 51). Refusing to "change her costume," she convinced the principal of her interest in pursuing the course. Kamaladevi reflected on her experiences at the East End as offering her a grounding in "different sections of society that developed in the slums and their needs" (Chattopadhyay 1986, 51) This offered Kamaladevi with an interesting opportunity for "gaze-reversal" that flipped conventional narratives of the "knower and the known." However, this "reversal" was not straightforward. Kamaladevi's simultaneous positioning as an elite, mobile young Indian woman—nonetheless viewed as an imperial subject in the metropole—but perhaps hierarchically higher up than the "wild urchins" she was to serve revealed how this movement between imperialized worlds was a complex negotiation. This hierarchical negotiation of social space was crucial throughout Kamaladevi's praxis of social work in the future.

At this juncture in 1921, there was a small web of elite and well-connected Indians overseas engaged in carrying India's message for freedom within wider anti-imperial contexts (Bose and Manjapra 2010; Raza, Roy, and Zachariah 2014; Bayly 2022a). As Kamaladevi traveled through Europe (Venice, Rome, London, Paris, and Moscow) after her social work training in the metropole (in London), she placed the need for societal change in anti-imperial rather than domestic terms. Through meetings with her then-brother-in-law, Virendranath Chattopadhyay, a staunch Marxist exiled in Berlin, and Madame Bhikaji Cama (Laursen 2021), an Indian-born Parsi anticolonial activist, she attended the League of Imperialism conference in Berlin. She gauged the complexity of imperialism as a "complex web of social relations" rather than "merely a vast British Army holding our country, but so many other vital forces which were subordinating the Indian people" (Chattopadhyay 1986, 55). She connected her understanding of imperialism with her Bedford social work degree and the need for direct social action. Kamaladevi remarked that "a war-torn and uprooted world" had caused "the utter collapse of the fabric of society [and] the frustrating impact this had on the youth." (Chattopadhyay 1986, 53). Importantly, Kamaladevi viewed the 1920s as a crucial time to call for societal change. We can already note a normative tilt to her politics when she argued that ". . . a new pattern of living would have to be evolved" (Chattopadhyay 1986, 53). This view toward societal change played a decisive role in shaping her long-term political thinking in the years to follow.

This "new pattern of living" that Kamaladevi had in mind was mass-based, women-led, and rooted in bottom-up societal transformation. The institutionalization of social work as a profession crucial to nation-building allowed Kamaladevi to test out direct social action as necessary for political change. She was keen that women should lead social work initiatives in response to societal conditions they faced in colonial India. As themselves facing prejudice, "their zeal for change was dynamic and passionate" (KC Papers, NMML). She dedicated most of her twenties toward mobilizing women into social spaces in a collective, trained, and organized manner. Importantly, we can note that her call for social work was not made on essentialist terms (i.e., based on women's biological ability to care/nurture), but rather on an early socialist inclination toward societal change, a normative goal that guided her politics (Chattopadhyay 1986). Throughout, she expressed a wide skepticism toward women's issues as separate from other economic and political questions, and what was then a popular "non-western" distrust toward "western-imported feminism," which would mean accepting women as inferior to men (Dubois and Lal 2017). Kamaladevi traveled around the country to gather support for social and legal women's rights through the AIWC, where Margaret Cousins, an Irish suffragist and Indian nationalist, was her mentor. In 1921–1922, the non-cooperation movement in colonial India led by Gandhi was in full swing. The movement was mass-based, built on the growing political unrest after the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre in 1919, and the infamous Rowlatt Act, which involved the preventive detention of revolutionary leaders. Already embedded in this political scene, Kamaladevi urged Gandhi

[2] I do not provide a totalizing account of Kamaladevi's political project that stretched over six decades, which is far beyond the scope of this paper. This important task has been taken up in the edited volume "A Passional Life" by Dubois and Lal (2017).

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to call on women during the Salt Satyagraha civil disobedience march and eventually gave up her general secretary position at the AIWC to participate in direct action (Chattopadhyay 1986).

Kamaladevi's on-the-ground social work and party politics in colonial India not only fused but also clashed with her academic training in Western social thought (particularly Marxism) in England. As with many anticolonial leaders of her time, the Bolshevik revolution and its aftermath left a deep imprint on her. She was one of the founding members of the socialist offshoot of the Congress party, the CSP in the 1930s. While she was drawn to Marxist principles, particularly the importance of material conditions and the economic structure in the functioning of society, she distanced herself from hard-leaning Communists in the Congress, for whom, "Party was supreme, everything else being subordinate to it" (Chattopadhyay 1986, 214). She aligned herself more closely with the democratic socialism of leaders such as Jayaprakash Narayan and Rammanohar Lohiya who emphasized popular modes of protests such as strikes and civil disobedience and worked on rural and social uplift of women (Sherman 2018). They used the CSP as a bridge between elite interests of the Congress and mass-based social politics and expanded their reach to trade and women's workers' unions and the *Seva Dal*, Congress's grassroots organization (Chattopadhyay 1986, 185–89).

Seva and Subjecthood: The Normative and Pedagogical Considerations of Kamaladevi's Social Work

Kamaladevi had a modern conception of twentieth-century social work. This vision of social work, which drew on western imperial modes of technical expertise, particularly the rise of local, national, and international social organizations, was turned on its head by Kamaladevi for an anti-imperial, nationalist cause. Her family in India was "greatly perturbed" that she had chosen to study social work, "a leisure hour occupation generated by compassion and goodwill, not academic discipline," at Bedford College (Chattopadhyay 1986, 53). However, it was precisely this distinction that was important to Kamaladevi's praxis of social work (Chattopadhyay 1986, 53). In an early 1950s essay on "the Genesis of Social Work" written for an Encyclopedia of Social Work (KC Papers, NMML), she traced the long historical origins of the term across a range of societies ranging from the Hindu concept of *Dharma* (roughly, duty), through the French, Russian, and industrial revolutions, and to the nineteenth century Indian social reformers against British and French colonial rule. However, a break occurred in the twentieth century, with "the origin of the social worker as a distinct secular force, separate from family and religious groups" (KC Papers, NMML).

Thus, in contrast to viewing social work as either charity or a part of a civilizing mission, which was more common to Euro-American feminists in the 1920s historical context (Chaudhuri and Strobel 1992), she viewed it as technical expertise to be "executed by trained workers" (Chattopadhyay 1986, 237). Kamaladevi's quest for disciplined, trained, and mass-based social organizing was met with the timely creation of the *Seva Dal* in 1923, a grassroots voluntary organization, which was later integrated into the Congress. The *Seva Dal* was formed by like-minded social workers, N.S. Hardikar and Umabai Kundapur, who believed that it was necessary to organize men and women in mass cadre-based voluntary camps, with mental and physical strength, to succeed in their political aims of achieving India's freedom. Hardikar had returned after a stint of political campaigning in organizations such as the Indian Home Rule League in the United States in close association with Lala Lajpat Rai, the prominent Indian nationalist leader. He gained Congress leaders' attention when he refused to write an apology to the British authorities to gain a commutation on his prison sentence. Thus, the *Hindustani Seva Dal* was formed as a grassroots support base for the Congress, modeled on Hardikar's regional organization in Hubli, the *Hubli Seva Mandal*. Chief tasks of the group involved picketing, flag hoisting, singing patriotic songs, and providing mass support during Congress sessions. Kamaladevi was roped into this organization and became involved in the creation and sustenance of trained cadres in "non-violent struggle when discipline, patience and forbearance were crucial." (Chattopadhyay 1986, 73). As Kamaladevi pointed out in her memoirs (Chattopadhyay 1986), many volunteers were tirelessly working toward a future (Indian nationhood) that they may not have lived to see. This was indicative of the sense of sacrifice required from individuals within the *Seva Dal* and larger social spaces during colonial India.

Kamaladevi believed that subjects could be morally reasoned with to "do the right thing" for the sake of the collective conscience. Since individuals could not be *forced* to fulfil their moral obligation toward society and one another, this had to be fulfilled in imaginative and affective ways, especially through social organizing. This morality was not positioned abstractly—it was constructed in historically specific ways in normative opposition to colonial modes of pedagogical dominance. As Guha (1997) states, colonial pedagogy referred to ways in which enlightenment was touted as an end goal through training, education, and instruction. However, and importantly, these pedagogies were aimed at creating disciplined and obedient colonial subjects (Guha 1997) who would be prepared for self-governance based on their hierarchical positioning on the civilizational ladder. In contrast, organizations such as the *Seva Dal* were purportedly built on principles that opposed British ways of conceptualizing instruction, replacing it with "care, austerity, and kinship" such as that exemplified by Gandhi's anticolonial nationalism (Chatterjee 2010, 287).

Kamaladevi's larger political project connected her socialist thinking to the human condition and an Indian cultural renaissance. Engagement with the *swadeshi* movement (through her participation in civil disobedience) was crucial to Kamaladevi's conception of the productive "self" as a non-negotiable part of society and thus politics. She drew on a wealth of swadeshi intellectual and political traditions within the broader Indian independence movement, particularly on the lineages of M.K. Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore—both of whom relied on hands-on self-expression as interwoven with their politics. For Tagore, prominent Indian poet, and nationalist, it was *Shantiniketan's* creation (a center for arts and culture) and for Gandhi, it was the use of indigenous *Khadi* cloth and *charka* (the spinning wheel). This was the time when there was a broader political conversation on a cultural "Indian Renaissance." Chatterjee argues that this "inner domain of culture became the sovereign territory of the nation—which the colonial state cannot enter or dominate" (Chatterjee 2010, 525). The rhetoric is one of "kinship, austerity, and sacrifice" (Chatterjee 2010, 287). Kamaladevi was deeply inspired by a timely visit to *Shantiniketan* in 1922, where she met Tagore and shared ideas with him about the importance of an "Indian cultural renaissance" (Chattopadhyay 1986, 70–71). Tagore himself had shortly before argued for a "spiritual recognition of unity" among Indians despite

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"socially regulated differences" (Tagore 2017, 35–36). Kamaladevi, as both a patron and a performer of arts and theater (her then husband and she were actors in various theater productions in the 1920s), also contextualized culture as a crucial part of India's "rebirth" through independence. For her, the main characteristic of this cultural renaissance was that it had to be "all-inclusive" and involved a realization of individual creativity. The indivisibility of culture was important as upon that rested "India's basic message of humanity" (Chattopadhyay 1986, 71). Devenish has argued that while Gandhi demanded self-sacrifice (or transcendence of the self), Kamaladevi held that individual expression was sacrosanct, and necessary for liberation, for both the self and the collective (DuBois and Lal 2017, 364).

This individual–collective problem highlighted a pragmatic tension for Kamaladevi's praxis of social work—how would mass-based mobilization be achieved while not sacrificing the self? This question was salient for Kamaladevi as her social work and service sought to imagine and construct a normative subjecthood in the cause of a better society. She was well versed with the contradiction between recognizing individualized, creative self-expression (through *swadeshi*) and accepting the sacrifice or transcendence of the self for the larger goal (such as nationhood and betterment of society). While holding on to her anti-imperialist and socialist leanings, she insisted that the need for macroeconomic and structural reforms should not subsume individuals and their creative urges. Here, she differed from *both* Marxism and Gandhianism (DuBois and Lal 2017). In an essay for *Modern Review*, Kamaladevi argued that there was no possible separation between individual moral and social conscience and society's material and economic conditions (Chattopadhyay 1948). On the one hand, individuals should take conscious responsibility for how things are produced (both knowledge and material goods). On the other hand, the state should have the "actual structure and capacity to allow citizens to be free human beings" (Chattopadhyay 1948). However, normative subjecthood could (ought to) be regulated through "moral values." Unlike fascist states, newer states (or states-to-be) that are socialist but also liberal and democratic should regulate morality—not through violence, but through "reason and agreement built upon facts" (Chattopadhyay 1948). This authority of the state acts almost as a "self-restraint," which reasoning individuals realize they owe to each other—thereby strengthening each in the collective (Chattopadhyay 1948). Kamaladevi argued that it is easier (and more realistic) to emphasize the moral standards to which each individual should conform, instead of calling on the state to change its very nature. Thus, inherent in her line of thinking was some form of reasonable control of individuals as a moral imperative in the creation of a sustainable society (Chattopadhyay 1948).

Service (*seva)* was the mode through which the self could be valuable for societal regeneration. Kamaladevi's training and social organizing in the *Seva Dal* routinely saw individual liberty reigned in and curbed for a greater normative vision. This was partly because the "human renaissance" proscribed by Kamaladevi constructed the self in service of society, and explicitly as service toward the creation of the postcolonial Indian state, at least until the mid-1940s. Kamaladevi reflected in her memoirs (in the 1980s) on her own difficulties (and eventual feelings of fulfilment) in moving from the elite cultural circles of art and theater to the austere life of a "sepoy and a *sevika*" (female volunteer-worker) implying the sacrifice required for the greater good of nation-building (Chattopadhyay 1986, 53). The training period for Kamaladevi involved harsh physical exercises and extreme austerity in living conditions. The reigning in/disciplining of the individual self to promote a greater good was hence a salient factor here.

When Kamaladevi became more integrated with the *Seva Dal's* social organizing politics in the 1930s, the *Dal's* mass-based voluntary nature served as an imaginative means to experiment with pedagogical modes of cultural and nationalistic knowledge transmission. The *Dal* was animated by the normative teleology of a singular national culture through training and disciplining tactics. Amidst the political negotiations of the first Roundtable Conference talks (1930–1931), the Gandhi–Irwin pact had energized the national struggle, which gave the *Seva Dal* the impetus to maintain continued pressure through cultural and social means. If we recall Chatterjee's (1997) understanding of the creation of non-western modernities on cultural and spiritual terms (the inner space/"spiritual" was a high ground of burgeoning Indian nationalism that the colonial state could not dominate), then one such political project was being crafted through the practices of the *Seva Dal*.

It could be argued that Kamaladevi's participation and leadership in the *Dal* was seeped with the "nationalist ideology [that] empowered women of the middle class in a very limited way, engaging them in the task of building a consensus for the incipient nation-state" (Nair 1994, 89). Indeed, the *Dal's* construction of a collective subjecthood thronging with slogans of nationalistic pride, patriotic songs, and national flag hoisting sessions received an overwhelming response within various political circles, including from Gandhi who singled out praise for the *Dal's* efforts at mobilizing masses during the Belgaum Congress session in 1924 (Chattopadhyay 1986). Kamaladevi eventually took over as the General Officer Commanding (G.O.C.) of the women's wing of the *Dal*. The *Dal's* women under Kamaladevi's leadership had taken charge as "organisers, captains, messengers" and had made the *Dal* a "commanding factor in the national struggle" (Chattopadhyay 1986). A foreign correspondent, Webb Miller, reported one scene from a satyagraha march, where he was surprised by the upswell of *Seva Dal* volunteers and the "unbreakable morale of the participating crowds, the example of highly disciplined volunteers" (Chattopadhyay 1986, 160).

Discipline among volunteers was maintained through civil–society leaders such as Kamaladevi actively engaged in social organizing suffused with the language of solidarity and care. The humanness and care rhetoric of the *dal* and other such spaces were in response to the harsh treatment of individuals under the British Raj: including preventive detention and violent repression during *swadeshi* and Satyagraha movements. This showed an active attempt to reconstruct the colonial subject as deserving of care, cultural elements that would ultimately lead to the overthrowing of empire. For instance, a volunteer under Kamaladevi's leadership of the women's wing of the *Dal*, Kulsum Sayani, reported that she attended a social work training workshop hosted by AIWC where eighty young girls, from all "communities and castes . . . looked as though they belonged to one sisterhood … united under a common purpose and ideal" (KC Papers, NMML). There was also an affective touch to Sayani's report that ended with "if we succeed in this there will come a revolution based on love" (KC Papers, NMML). Simultaneously, in a newspaper report by C.P. Narayanaswamy about AIWC's volunteer camps, it is emphasized that Muslim and Adivasi women were eager participants in these workshops—and took on training duties despite differences in customs and practices (KC Papers, NMML). Thus, belongingness within a collective

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subjecthood in voluntary training spaces was maintained through a rhetoric of solidarity but also uniformity.

However, the *dal* also revealed a paradox at play in Kamaladevi's activism in response to the colonial encounter. The training of mass volunteers at the national scale involved the practice of pedagogical authority and the replication of colonial practices of disciplining. The *Dal's* vision, that Kamaladevi helped sustain, was a dominant vision for the modern nation-state in postindependence India. Thus, the *Dal's* attempts to reconstruct subjecthood for a collective cause in a nonviolent manner could not overcome its disciplinary impulse to organize and train in a manner that embodied an army-like spirit. It included a composite life of psychological, physical, and mental preparation for battle through "indigenous exercises handed down through generations, such as *lathi and danda* (hand-made stick-weapons, especially used by the police), *bhala* (hand-forged "warrior spear"), *Surya namaskars* (sun salutation postures) and various *yogasanas* (yoga poses)" (Chattopadhyay 1986, 77*)*. In addition, a whole Hindi vocabulary was worked out for giving orders. Kamaladevi remarked that when these physical exercises were performed en masse, it was "almost martial" (Chattopadhyay 1986, 77). While the *Seva Dal* was only one among the many organizations that had mass support in that period, British officials kept it under constant surveillance throughout its existence, and viewed it as a militia-like organization. Eventually, in 1931, the *Seva Dal* was banned alongside the Congress Party, particularly for cultivating a women's army. Clearly, the *Dal* was considered a troublesome and influential organization as it was permanently disbanded despite the lifted Congress ban, and Kamaladevi was arrested and incarcerated for her participation in it.

Kamaladevi's encounters with the *Seva Dal* are a concrete example of how her "politics of doing" played out in the wider pre-Indian independence nationalist context. Social work and organizing were sites rife with the paradoxical project of nation-building: reliant on mass mobilization, yet suffused with hierarchical, normative ideals of how such a subjecthood ought to morally act in the creation of postcolonial modernities. It was contingent on the erasure rather than emphasis on difference, disciplinary training, and a hierarchical relationship between elite leaders and the public. While it could be argued that some of this mobilization was a necessary part of the independence movement, it is interesting to trace the implications of such civil–society activism and political engagement across the temporal divide of Indian independence and at the decolonization "moment." When Kamaladevi's activist thought is repurposed in the "postimperial" space in the 1940s and after, some of the core tensions that characterized her civil–society leadership such as unity/difference, the individual/collective, and equality/hierarchy remained. Thus, taking these lineages of social work and its contradictions seriously allows us to contextualize Kamaladevi's post-1940s international thought at the substate level as drawing on earlier forms of politics rather than as a sharp breakaway. Thus, her international political visions stretched across both sides of the 1947 temporal divide.

Disjuncture in the 1940s

In the pursuit of national liberation, several ideological and normative paths were open to anticolonial thinkers: however, the creation of the Indian state foreclosed certain possibilities and amplified others. Recent works have encouraged our thinking about decolonization in South Asia as multilayered modes of policy and knowledge exchanges (Stolte 2019; Khan and Sherman 2022; Raghavan et al. 2022). Of particular interest are explorations of below-the-state level "transnational networks of affinity across Asia and Africa" (AANRC Manifesto 2018, 177) made possible by the changing political landscape of a world connected by Afro-Asian solidarities, where postcolonial nations were newly in-charge of how to steer their worlds. While the political transfer of power may have happened at a "moment in time," ideas about and connections between the decolonized world far exceed this temporal framing as historians such as Armstrong (2016) and Parr (2021) have shown. For instance, leftist women's groups such as the Women's International Democratic Front "did not conform to simple narratives where the place is the nation-state and the time is the handover of power to an independent government" (Armstrong 2016, 319–20). Less attention is paid to remnants of political projects and ideas that were considered idealistic or were only partly successful. Examining Kamaladevi's international thought in the 1940s–1960s offers an interesting case of an elite leader disillusioned and alienated with the postcolonial path on which India had set itself. Her growing disenchantment with the unrealized potential of postcolonial modernity in India meant that she repurposed her commitment to social work and extended her vision of subjecthood to a "shared humanity" across imperial and racial lines.

Despite Kamaladevi's prominent and active participation in the nationalist struggle, the seeds of her disillusionment and alienation were sown into unrealized visions of the postcolonial state's responsibilities. Kamaladevi's political position is made clear in a series of essays and reports in the 1940s, particularly her discontentment with excessive bureaucratization and the continuation of colonial policies such as preventive detention in a newly independent India. She was shaken by her close comrade, Rammanohar Lohiya, and fifty others' arrest in 1949, which she considered to be a curbing of the fundamental democratic right to protest. Her chief concern was that the new Indian state was reproducing colonial tendencies of disciplining and violent repression—antithetical to principles of democratic socialism. To complement this, Kamaladevi's major intellectual output in a series of essays *At the Cross-Roads* was published at the brink of Indian independence in 1947. It was edited by Yusuf Meherally (Mayor of Bombay, elected in 1942), one of Kamaladevi's closest socialist associates. The essays span a range of issues such as refugee rehabilitation after the India–Pakistan partition, political analyses of global imperialism and capitalism, democratic socialism, and women's struggle in societal transformation. Overall, the volume set the tone for Kamaladevi's critical re-examination of international political values with an outward-looking agenda. The essays made clear Kamaladevi's intellectual position on global politics as characterized by imperial relations, where many Asian and African nations continued to be under imperial rule despite India's formal independence.

In this context, one of the core disagreements between the Socialists and Nehru was regarding India's postindependence position and role in the Commonwealth. Nehru was keen on India joining the Commonwealth and criticized the socialists for being stuck in old political patterns, unwilling to accept the emergence of Asia as an international power in the 1940s (Chattopadhyay 1986). In response, Kamaladevi wrote a polemic pamphlet, "Socialists, a bunch of reactionaries?," and responded to Nehru that many countries within Asia and Africa continued to be caught in western imperialism's deadly grip and "that some of our commonwealth brethren are in this imperialists game too" (DuBois and Lal

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2017, 113). This exchange between Kamaladevi and Nehru indicated Kamaladevi's larger political position that the new Indian state was just as capable of being complicit in exploitative practices in the international political arena as the British imperial state had been and that the Indian state's present behavior in the international sphere should not be divorced from its past (Chattopadhyay 1986).

In 1947, the final cracks between the Socialist Party and the other senior Congress members, particularly Nehru and Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, were visible on the crucial Partition issue. The socialists, including Kamaladevi, were vehemently opposed to the idea of Partition, which they saw as a British divide-and-rule strategy, and wanted to go on a national strike. Kamaladevi was invited by Nehru to join the Congress Working Committee as a member and incidentally was one of the only socialists not to boycott the Committee (Chattopadhyay 1986). She voted against the Partition of India, despite being asked by Gandhi and Nehru to show a united front in favor of partition (Chattopadhyay 1986). Kamaladevi felt distinctly alienated from the official Congress line on partition. She reflected in her memoirs in the 1980s that with that vote, "I broke my link with this political life . . . with a growing realisation that this was not my vocation" (Chattopadhyay 1986, 305). She claimed to have had "no regrets" when she retreated from active party politics, once India's national liberation was formally settled (Chattopadhyay 1986). Kamaladevi in close communication with her socialist comrades wanted nothing short of the "Gandhian concept of freedom, the establishment of a social order which meant an alternative to both capitalism and Marxism" (Chattopadhyay 1986, 329). For the large part, the shared pursuits of Socialist leaders such as Narayan and Lohia, along with Kamaladevi, of a bottom-up democracy based on village units and an emphasis on a cultural renaissance, remained unrealized at the state level.

Her alienation from official Congress party channels of foreign policy and diplomacy is also visible in her reluctance to accept high political positions in the new Indian state. In contrast, most of Kamaladevi's contemporary women activists from the Indian independence era such as Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Vijayalakshmi Pandit, Hansa Mehta (Rathore 2021), and Sarojini Naidu all took on high national and international positions at the governmental level in the burgeoning state. Kamaladevi too was offered several positions but declined political office. Her brief trysts with the UN Human Rights Commission (UNHRC) in 1947 (studied in Bhagavan 2017 in Dubois and Lal 2017, 424–44) and UNESCO (Chattopadhyay 1986, 344) left her deeply dissatisfied with excessively bureaucratic procedures. She was insistent that her true calling was on-ground social work rather than positions of political power within the postcolonial state (Chattopadhyay 1986).

Kamaladevi's turn away from official party politics allows us to explore what Lewis and Stolte (2019, 4) call her "intensive social and cultural interaction across the postcolonial world" in the Bandung era. Scholars have argued that the "Bandung era," marked by the crucial Bandung Conference of Afro-Asian countries, marked the opening of a cross-section of solidarities in the newly decolonized world (Lee 2010). Kamaladevi's political engagement can be placed within this historical juncture, with her contention that Indian independence "was in and of itself only a stepping-stone to a larger cause, the service of humanity by a recognition of the underlying unity of all peoples" (Dubois and Lal 2017, 428). The discontents of her pre-independence normative political project gave her the impetus to express her international thought through alternative means such as cultural travels abroad and subsequent ethnographic newspaper reportage. Her continued civil–society activism enabled her to extend her subjecthood imaginary to visions of "shared humanity" within anti-imperial and racialized international contexts. However, as the accounts below demonstrate, Kamaladevi's postimperial political engagement sustained the power hierarchies of her pre-independence political thought.

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Movement across West Asia and Africa in the 1940s–1960s

Kamaladevi's international thought in the 1940s developed during global political upheaval. The second world war and the holocaust generated new thinking on the human condition and human rights (Moyn 2012). This was also a moment when universal conceptions of "humanity" abound internationally, with various competing ideas emerging in the 1930s and 1940s (Moyn 2012). Simultaneously, the UNHRC was richly debating the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Kamaladevi encountered this changing historical context during her civil–society activist travels to the United States, China, Japan, and Egypt as she avoided incarceration in India for her participation in the Gandhian Quit India Movement (1941–1942). According to Vinay Lal, her 18-month trip to the United States in 1941–1942 is one of the few instances of an early ethnography of the "developed world" from an Indian woman: where she "reverses the [imperial] gaze" in postcolonial lingo (Dubois and Lal 2017, 27). During this trip, Kamaladevi situated herself within Afro-Asian solidarity networks and authored two books, *Uncle Sam's Empire* (1944) and *America: The Land of Superlatives* (1946), an incisive critical analysis of American histories and international politics, as entangled in empire, racism, and settler colonialism.

While Kamaladevi's travels to the United States have been carefully examined, less attention has been paid to her ethnographic newspaper reportage and cultural travels to West Asia and parts of Africa in the 1950s and 1960s, which served as important sites of her continued civil–society activism and world-making. It was her social activism that propelled her intellectual and political project toward a more global context in the mid-twentieth century. She characterized this crucial historical period as being of "particular interest at the time when entire shapes of empires and colonies is in the melting pot and the bona-fides of the so-called British Commonwealth is on trial" (Chattopadhyay 1947, 186). Briefly examining reports from her travels, I present a critical perspective on her "coloured cosmopolitanism" (Slate 2009) and "gaze reversal" (DuBois and Lal 2017) that exhibit some of the core tensions that characterized her civil–society leadership pre-independence on equality/hierarchy. These postindependence trips abroad only feature toward the end of Kamaladevi's memoirs *Inner Recesses, Outer Spaces* (1986) and in some fragmented archival newspaper reports—and are yet to be thoroughly analyzed in secondary literature (such as Dubois and Lal 2017). Kamaladevi traveled extensively in the 1950s and 1960s across Egypt, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, Iraq, Ethiopia, Eretria, and Libya, among other places. While I do not cover the entire geographical breadth of her political and cultural travels, I offer snippets of her travel reportage and political analysis that complicate her position as an elite, mobile Indian postcolonial leader. Her ethnography in West Asia and parts of Africa reveals a picture of her postimperial engagements that was suffused with a power dynamic that

is transposed from earlier pre-independence social work in the metropole and the *Seva Dal*.

Kamaladevi's connected social imaginaries of race and empire in the 1950s can be traced back to her travels to the United States between 1939 and 1942, where she espoused a "coloured cosmopolitanism," mainly through her encounters in the United States with African–American activists (Slate 2009). She learnt from various African–Americans, met with labor leaders, youth advocates, social reformers, and prominent figures such as A.J. Muste, Paul Robeson, Eleanor, and F.D. Roosevelt, among others, and stayed with many unnamed black people in the segregated South (Slate 2009). Slate reminds us that Kamaladevi built on more than 50 years of race relations between Indians and Americans that "defied narrow, chauvinist definitions of race, religion, or nation, while simultaneously encouraging the unity of 'coloured' peoples" (Slate 2009, 7). With this intellectual background, we might connect her shared vision of humanity with her later travels to the African continent, where she framed "the African problem as a world problem" rather than as the racialized other (Chattopadhyay 1947). She noted that the "Africa problem is a problem which divides the world between the White and the Coloured, the dominating and the exploited, a basic human problem that can only be overcome with a radical change in our social and economic values" (Chattopadhyay 1947, 195). There is a cosmopolitanism at play here, but it is crucial to note how Kamaladevi framed "the African problem" and its solution in normative terms in line with her socialist values geared toward a "radical change" in socioeconomic values.

Kamaladevi's ethnographic accounts, when viewed through a longer intellectual context across the 1947 independence divide, demonstrate how her political position was shaped by uneven power relations in social spaces (Hemmings 2018). Her postindependence social activism continued to exhibit hierarchical notions of anti-imperial solidarity. Her claim in *The People of Africa*, published in *At the Cross-Roads* (1947), that the "Africa problem [is] a basic human problem" is her expression of idealized connections across worlds. However, there is scant mention of internal hierarchies, particularly of caste, "at home," which point to the ambivalent nature of this "shared humanity." This ambivalence is further striking as the conditions of possibility of Kamaladevi's travels abroad that framed the global intellectual context for her thought on humanity in anti-imperial and racialized terms were founded on caste and class privilege (see also Natarajan 2022; Dilawri, forthcoming). This is reminiscent of both her East End social work days at Bedford College (1921) and paradoxes from her *Seva Dal* leadership (1920s–1930s) discussed previously, where her universalist visions clashed with and subsumed rooted difference. This also brings to light how Kamaladevi being a product of a cohort of elite Indian women who often spoke for "all women" in India across caste, class, and religious identities (Devenish 2021) had a lasting impact on her postcolonial political engagement. This longer historical framing (across the colonial divide) further enables us to view Kamaladevi's race-conscious and anti-imperial politics of the 1940s–1950s more critically.

Partha Chatterjee (2010, 27) has argued that "the mark of non-Western modernity," in which "modernization" is always an "incomplete project, to be carried out by an enlightened elite engaged in a pedagogical mission in relation to the rest of society." Through this lens, Kamaladevi's travels and writings in the 1940s–1960s are characterized by the paradoxical tendency of her previous social work—which sought to express universal solidarity but was suffused with pedagogical authority. Kamaladevi's centering of Africa within a racialized imperial order is a good example of this pedagogical motivation. In her journalistic reportage, Kamaladevi called Africa "a dice in the imperialist games of tomorrow" and predicted that as the "West as a ruling power is being pushed out of Asia, it is seeking to entrench itself in Africa" (DuBois and Lal 2017, 252). In this political analysis, we can note that her writing style is filled with facts and figures, and her tone is didactic and paternalistic, as she conveyed sympathy for the "African problem" to the Indian public. Her argument that Africa is "fast becoming the White man's economic and military base" and that Britain, once it "liquidates its empire," will concentrate its exploitative power in Africa (DuBois and Lal 2017, 252) is a case in point.

She also offered views about shared Third World struggles to the Indian public through a popular Indian newspaper, *Bharat Jyoti*, which had commissioned her ethnographic reportage on her various trips abroad in 1950's and 1960s. They printed her political analyses as a recurring series. In her reportage, she wrote for her socialist contemporaries but also attempted to reach the wider public and argued for the urgent stakes of taking the ground realities of eastern and southern Africans under imperial rule seriously. Her weekly columns focused on different states (Algeria, Libya, Kenya, South Africa, and Ethiopia) for the Indian public, where she offered political analyses on the global exploitation of African and Asian colonies. For instance, she remarked that "most people, especially in the West, believe that British Africa is a dominion enjoying as free a status as Canada or Australia . . . few have any clear conception as to the actual reality of the problem and how misleading this picture of Africa is" (Chattopadhyay 1947). She pointed to the asymmetrical but connected natures of imperial and racial struggles and disrupted commonly held myths about African diasporic communities, religious minorities, and other marginalized groups that the Indian public commonly believed.

Kamaladevi's postcolonial civic engagement and continued anticolonial sympathies existed in a liminal space, simultaneously "inside" and "outside" the new Indian state's global knowledge exchanges. Her trip to Iraq in 1949 serves as an example here. Two members of the Arab League had met her and invited her to visit Iraq, and she had a chance opportunity to give a talk at the Iraqi Ladies Union as she was passing through a UNESCO conference in Beirut (Chattopadhyay 1986). Kamaladevi's prominence as a nationalist leader meant that she was welcomed by throngs of people from the Indian community, various dignitaries from the Iraqi government, and members of the Iraqi Ladies Union. Her presence at such gatherings was based on intellectual networks, knowledge expertise, and personal friendships she had gained over decades of women's organizing and social work pre-independence. During her stay, accompanied by an Indian living in Iraq named Dr Romeo De Sousa, she visited various governmental officials, cultural sites, and women's associations (Chattopadhyay 1986). The impact of her trip and speeches was made clear in a report that De Sousa wrote to K.P.S. Menon in the External Affairs Ministry shortly after her visit (KC Papers, NMML). He praised the "tremendous and spontaneous reception that Kamaladevi got from the people and the press" (KC Papers, NMML). The report also noted that, in general, Iraq was ill-informed about India and had learnt from sources "unfriendly to India" but that Kamaladevi's trip and presence did much to dispel the previous image of India that the Iraqi public held (KC Papers, NMML). D'Souza reported that they owed "much to Kamaladevi for explaining the

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present conditions in India under the popular leadership of Nehru" (KC Papers, NMML).

The liminality of Kamaladevi's position is visible in the fact that despite her reservations about Nehru's stand on various international issues (such as India's place in the Commonwealth)—she was an ambassador seen as being sent abroad "on behalf of" the government. This is further highlighted by a letter Kamaladevi received from Nehru (KC Papers, NMML), who congratulated her on her successful mission and said that they "might call on her services again when needed." Such missions were significant in building solidarities among the newly decolonized world that ran parallel to more official state policies. These were not official diplomatic but cultural missions—which we might think of as an in-between form of knowledge and "goodwill" exchange.

She negotiated her privileged position as a modern Indian political leader and balanced her continued anticolonial commitments without alienating Nehru's official foreign policy positions. For instance, excerpts of her speech at the Iraqi Ladies Union published in the Baghdad daily Arabic newspaper *al-Zaman* show how she lauded medical missions and aid sent by India to Turkey and similar missions to China and India's contributions to the Palestine Refugee Fund—even while India was battling its own refugee problem (KC Papers, NMML). She utilized common vocabulary available to postcolonial leaders who espoused Afro-Asian solidarities, such as Asia being "one great family" (Abraham 2008). She further contextualized Asia's shared struggles for freedom and solidarity in her speech by invoking conferences such as the First Asian Relations Conference hosted in Delhi by Jawaharlal Nehru (KC Papers, NMML). Thus, while critical of the Indian state's politics at home (as shown in previous sections), she is not opposed to shoring up support for India's international standing within Asia as an elite postcolonial leader. She shared views about Indian political and economic conditions to gain sympathy and goodwill both from Indians abroad and from Asian populations through these cultural exchanges. However, she stopped short of being an active participant at the Bandung Conference, or the Committee on the Relaxation of International Tensions (CRIT) conference hosted in the same period by a contemporary social worker and pacifist, Rameshwari Nehru (Stolte 2019), thus distancing herself from direct state institutional responsibility.

Retroactively, many anticolonial women have been dubbed as "national" women, that is, representing state interests (Jayawardena 2016). Kamaladevi's civil–society activism in the early 1950s offers insights into the liminality of these positions, especially how she leveraged not having to speak "on behalf of" state-level institutions, while still being connected to powerful affiliations that came with being viewed as an ambassador of the Indian state. Thus, the creation of the new Indian state within the context of political decolonization did not signal a clean break with the hierarchical politics of elite Indian women pre-independence era activists who had only a decade ago promoted a national cultural consistency at the cost of suppressing internal differences.

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined how Kamaladevi's social organizing tactics at the Indian nationalist voluntary organization *Seva Dal* (1920s–1930s) and her "postimperial" activist travel accounts in Asia and Africa (1940s–1950s) were important sites of world-making. Crucial to this narrative was how her concrete social work action revealed paradoxes in her idealized political thought. The paradox, I have suggested, lay in the tensions between Kamaladevi's solidarity politics and her duties toward postcolonial nation-building. In the 1920s and 1930s, this is visible in her *Seva Dal* leadership that constructed selfhood en masse in service of an imagined nation, crucially brought to life through a culturally unified and hierarchical understanding of social spaces. As Kamaladevi became disenchanted with the burgeoning Indian state, this selfhood is transposed onto her ideas of a shared humanity in a global context, fueled by her civil–society activism abroad. How Kamaladevi framed notions of shared humanity—distinctly rooted in a politics of anti-imperialism and race consciousness—further elucidates earlier tensions in her international thought cultivated through hierarchized social action. Shared humanity alluded to (idealized) connected social imaginaries across borders and yet was conceived through pedagogical views on difference and continued sympathies to a newly independent India's nation-building tactics during her civil–society engagements abroad.

The paper's concrete analysis of Kamaladevi's social work across time also has broader analytical stakes for the study of historical international thought. Forging direct connections between her social work and political analyses shows how the epistemic and pedagogical credence she gained through her direct social action and negotiation of hierarchized social spaces bolstered her political thought—making it an indispensable site of knowledge production. However, beyond recovering "alternative" sites of knowledge, we might think of social work as a "fascinating site for analysing the interweaving of knowledge, power and institutions" (Bell 2009, 9). Kamaladevi's politics of "doing" offers a granular account of agency in a way that acknowledges its complex and shifting power-knowledge dynamics. Her ostensibly "local" volunteering role and later leadership at the *Seva Dal*, an institution created in direct response to British imperialism, were themselves rooted in a modern conception of social work, via training in England. In turn, her participation in mass-based social action and her movement across imperialized worlds created and sustained some of her hierarchized understanding of political thought, action, and solidarities. Examining how anticolonial women forged their political worlds requires taking all aspects of their life and thought seriously—not just in essentialist, nativist, or binary terms, but in their full complexity that is attentive to more problematic aspects of their thought, as Bayly (2022b) and Birkvad (2020) have suggested.

This reading also challenges how ostensibly justifiable historical anticolonial recovery projects that rest on fixed conceptions of post/anticolonial identity obscure how we make sense of Indian women (or other such historical figures) as complex, modern subjects cutting through the colonial/postcolonial temporal framing. Thus, while Kamaladevi's gendered and racialized position has impeded her reception as an international thinker, conflating her significance solely to her identity would be problematic.

Scholars have now grappled with the systematic nature of this racialized and gendered erasure of women's international thought (Bay et al. 2015; Vitalis 2016; Owens and Rietzler 2021; Rathore 2021). In response, Owens and Rietzler have recently called for a more "global" recovery of women's international thought (Owens and Rietzler 2021). In recovering and analyzing Kamaladevi's intellectual work in this paper, the challenge was to take seriously the "double exclusions of imperialism and patriarchy" (Burton 2003) without falling back on essentialist accounts. In this sense,

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the paper goes beyond slotting Kamaladevi back as a "brown woman thinker," cautious of feminist historians Harding's (1995) and Scott's (1988) calls not to "add gender and stir." Instead, the paper has presented an account of how Kamaladevi's politics of "doing" has animated her international thought as an elite, mobile political thinker.

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