A PASSIONATE LIFE
Writings By and On Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay

Edited by
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Foreword by
Gloria Steinem
Contents

Foreword: A Past and Future Teacher                          xi
    Gloria Steinem

Introduction: Feminism and the Roots of Kamaladevi         1
    Chattopadhyay’s Activism
    Ellen Carol DuBois

Introduction: A Radical Democrat: Passion and Politics     20
    in the Life of Kamaladevi
    Vinay Lal

Part I
Kamaladevi’s Writings

1. Her Life and Her Credo                                     45
   A Kannada Childhood                                        47
   India’s Needs: Shrimati Kamala Devi’s Election Speech      53
   Restatement of Human Values                                57

2. Feminism and Women in India                               67
   The Status of Women in India                               70
   Enfranchisement of Women                                  76
   Labour and Motherhood                                      80
The Women’s Movement – Then and Now 85
Some Real Issues Facing Women 89

3. Socialism at Home and Abroad 98
   The Simple Case for Democratic Socialism 101
   Socialists, a Bunch of Reactionaries? 108
   The Congress and Socialism 118
   Communists and Indian Socialism 123

4. Gandhi: Liberator and Mentor, Autocrat and Magician 127
   Enter Gandhi 131
   What Gandhiji Has Done for Women 133
   Mahatma Gandhi and One World 142
   A New Mode of Dissent 147
   Forging a Nation: The Constructive Programme 151
   An Unorthodox Fighter 165

5. Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Partition of India 167
   Imperialism and Class-Struggle 170
   Pakistan and the Shifting of Population 178
   Salt and Satyagraha 184
   Vivisection and a Fractured Past 200

6. Social Reconstruction after Independence 205
   Refugees, Rehabilitation and Reconstruction 208
   The Food Problem 215

7. Asia, Africa, and the Global South 222
   Letters to Mary Van Kleeck 225
   Nanking 237
   Chungking 240
   The Awakening of Asia 246
   The People of Africa 252
   The Struggle of Viet Nam Against French Imperialism 259
8. An Indian in America 269
   In America 271
   The Caribbean – America’s Sea of Destiny 283
   The Heritage of the Pilgrims 286
   A Facet of America: The T. V. A. 291

9. Embroidering India: Arts, Crafts, and Culture 298
   Handicrafts in India 301
   Early Vignettes from a Life in the Arts 309
   Painting with Needle 314
   The Media of Puppetry 319

10. The Tribal World 323
    An Englishman in Another India 325
    The Tribal Worldview 328

**PART II**

**CRITICAL ASSESSMENTS**

Creativity as Freedom: Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and the Politics of Self-Expression
*Annie Devenish*

Becoming a Coloured Woman: Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and the African American Freedom Struggle
*Nico Slate*

‘Chasing Me Over the Globe’: Kamaladevi and the Limits of Imperial Surveillance and Passport Controls, 1939–41
*Julie Laut*

*Manu Bhagavan*
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENTS</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The Essential Freedom Fighter: Some Reminiscences of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Devaki Jain</td>
<td>445</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chronological Table</td>
<td>457</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vinay Lal and Jesse Mosqueda</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Select Bibliography</td>
<td>465</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vinay Lal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>472</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes on Contributors</td>
<td>474</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>477</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Though the phrase “Global South” is of recent vintage, Kamaladevi can be viewed as a proponent of the idea from around the late 1920s, when she first began to travel overseas. She attended the “International Alliance of Women in Berlin” in 1929, only to become aware of how race and national boundaries might become obstacles to the solidarity of women: it was a “misnomer” to call it “International”, she says, as the only non-Western representatives were from Egypt and India, and the “other colonial countries were represented by their rulers and not the country’s nationals” (Inner Recesses Outer Spaces, p. 125). The Women’s International League for Peace and Freedom meeting at Prague, which may be characterized as more of a meeting between women from the West and the colonized world, also alerted her to the work of Jane Addams and the institution associated with her name, Hull House; and, at the International Session of the League Against Imperialism in Frankfurt, Kamaladevi could discuss problems encountered in common by subjugated peoples in West Africa, North Africa, Indochina, the American South, and elsewhere. All of this transpired within the space of less than a year – but Kamaladevi continued to forge such alliances and networks over the course of three long decades, facilitating, in many respects that are yet to be recognized, India’s emergence as one of the leaders of the Non-Aligned Movement and the
crafting of the Bandung Declaration of 1956 which was nothing other than a clarion call for a fundamental reordering of the world order. However, if her invisible hand, so to speak, can be discerned in India’s attempts to create a third space in the global arena of politics, when the Cold War was pushing every country to declare its loyalty to either camp, it is her abiding interest in creating solidarity among the colonized peoples of the world which makes her an especially significant and inspirational figure.

Before India had contact with the West, and long before Southeast Asia came under colonial rule, India and the Southeast had been linked together by various ties over centuries. Not only Hinduism and Buddhism but also Islam travelled from India to Southeast Asia. Buddhism helped India forge links with China and Japan just as Islam enabled connections between West Asia and India. Gujarati traders were to be found for centuries in every port over the vast Indian Ocean trading system. One of the most deleterious consequences of colonialism was that among colonized peoples, even the memories of their cultural, economic, and social exchanges with each other were eviscerated over a period of time. The West became the reference point for all intellectual exchanges; today, nearly five decades after the de-colonization of Africa was set in place, and almost 70 years after the independence of India, the situation remains substantially unaltered. Indians, Kenyans, Nigerians, Vietnamese, Algerians: the educated among them know something of their own culture and something of the West and almost nothing of each other. Most intellectual exchanges amongst formerly colonized peoples are still mediated through the West: it is not merely the case that Indians are likely to encounter Egyptians or Indonesians at American universities, but it is their shared knowledge of Hollywood, American popular culture, or the writings of a Foucault or an Edward Said, that furnishes them with some common elements of a conversation.

Kamaladevi’s writings on Asia, Africa, and the Global South convey her awareness of the gravity of the problem. The selections
in this section, all from the 1940s, point to different facets of her interest in the peoples of Asia and Africa and their histories. “The Struggle of Viet Nam against French Imperialism”, first published like two of the other selections in the Modern Review, shows her firm grasp over the history of colonialism in Vietnam. Kamaladevi was never seduced by the idea that the European Left stood for progressive policies with respect to the question of empire, and her piece is unequivocally clear in its critique of the failure of the Left in France to ally itself with Vietnamese nationalists agitating for independence. Indeed, as she points out in this article, the French only sought to re-impose colonial rule over their former possessions after the defeat of the Japanese. But Kamaladevi is equally unsparing towards the Japanese, whether in this piece, her writings on Japan, her short book on wartime China, or in her private correspondence. “The Awakening of Asia” not only calls upon Asian countries to restore their independence and put themselves on a sound economic footing but also warns against Japan’s attempts to position itself as the vanguard of pan-Asianism. “It is no use,” she wrote to some American friends from Tokyo’s Imperial Hotel on 7 July 1941, “Japan presuming to look on such an immense continent with such diversities as Asia, as though it were a backyard to breed a brood of chickens. The idea of building a ‘Family State’ as children of the Emperor, would strike most of the Asiatics as fantastic.”

Kamaladevi’s letter of July 7th is one of four previously unpublished letters included in this section. These letters, which marvellously display her wit, panache, and insurgent tone, give a vivid impression of Kamaladevi at work, representing Indian nationalist opinion abroad, meeting with political dignitaries, and fearlessly speaking her mind at public gatherings. The letters also offer her insights into the political situation in China and her assessment of Japanese people and their political leadership. Her book, In War-torn China, from which two chapters are excerpted, relays her experience of China as it valiantly struggled against
Japanese aggression. Her account of how the Chinese responded to air-raid sirens is just as interesting as her contrast of the two wartime capitals, Chungking and Nanjing. Though Kamaladevi had a greater acquaintance with China, Japan, and the rest of Asia than she did with Africa, the final selection in this section on “The People of Africa” again suggests her interests in the wider world, her attempts to bring Africa into the orbit of Indian consciousness, her admirable command over a considerable swathe of historical and official literature, and her unshakeable conviction in the dignity of all people.

[VL]

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**LETTERS TO MARY VAN KLEECK**

[From the Van Kleeck Papers, Smith College, Northampton, Massachusetts.]

Letter One: Tokyo, Japan, 22nd May ’41

My dear friends,

I am sorry not to have been able to write to you since I left the States. I had only a week in Honolulu due to sudden changes in sailing schedules. I spoke at the Pan-Pacific luncheon and at the University. I made front page news – rather the pressmen who met me on the boat did – with my picture all complete, very prominently on the front page of every paper under the caption: “India loyal to the Empire, says Indian woman leader.” So when I began to talk it was front page sensation again with my picture. But this time it was “Indian leader bitterly assails England”, “Flay Br. Policy” etc etc. Anyway it was good propaganda.

I felt so unhappy when I left Honolulu. Until then I had deluded myself somehow that I was still in the States. I was not able to make any good contacts there either, I thought the Hawaiian people very appealing. There is something very wistful and tender in their eyes. A private demonstration of their music...
and dance was arranged for me in a private home and I was able
to see the authentic stuff. I found a very close link with India
through Java, both in the dance gestures as well as the musical
instrument. I wished I could have learnt more.

The sea was not so bad but I was stuck to my bed completely
for the first part of the trip to Honolulu…. On the next trip out
my steward turned out to be an experienced labour organiser
and had wide experience outside of the States and could tell
me many things about labour outside too. He showed me he
was reading Nehru’s autobiography and very much later he told
me something interesting. I had discovered there was a certain
amount of attention that I was getting on the boat. It seems the
day the ship docked at Honolulu the crew had stumbled on the
front page news of my assailing Britain and had become excited
when they found I was a passenger on their boat. My steward
seems to have been giving audiences to several of them who came
for information. He said even the scullerymen, the engine room
men had come to have a peep….

I have had 12 days of some experience in this country and
I want to tell you for I think it will be of interest to you. I have
had a very cordial welcome. There was a public reception at
Kobe when I landed, by Indian and Japanese organisations, very
elaborate affair….

It seems the authorities are aware of my views – complexion
of my ideology – and had not been too happy at the prospect
of my visit. But certain people impressed on them that after all
I represented the Indian point of view and if I could see and
understand their point of view there was a chance of India being
impressed. At a reception given by the Chamber of Commerce
many of the leading men and women were present so I took
the occasion to speak on the Sino-Japanese conflict…. Many
replied saying we did not understand that the China campaign
was different, we got our views from the West! The absurdity of
our learning to be anti-imperialist from England and America,
and not our own bitter experience, did not strike there. Yesterday at another reception when I arrived here I touched on it again and created quite a crisis. The man who was translating would not touch it. Later came an uneasy situation. The Govt. has said on the floor of the Diet the people of Japan sympathise with the Indian struggle and morally support it. So this enables the Japanese people to organise public meetings. I have no doubt their feelings in the matter are very genuine. They have no bitterness against the Chinese either. So they are all the time being told, the war is not against China but against Chiang and his foreign clique, who are out to destroy Japan! In my press conference I said plainly that Chiang had been a friend of Japan and therefore that argument was not true. That was admitted. Yesterday I took up the arguments raised by Japan explaining to us that they are attempting to form a family of nations. I said this had a very familiar ring for us because it is the very argument used by Br. imperialists. The other thing follows this. There must be a division of work in the family. So while Japan produced manufactures, military, runs the govt. the other people produce raw material, food stuff. So I explained how that had worked under every imperialism. I also have been exposing the Axis powers as being imperialistic and therefore we do not look to them for the liberation of the subject people. I have charged Japan for not championing the cause of the subject people and becoming their rallying ground, but allying itself first with England and now with the Axis powers. I am afraid it has been very unpalatable. Well I am going to tell them that if they are not prepared to hear us and try to understand our viewpoint we shall never establish closer links, shall have to tell India that too.

There is a wide recognition of the fact that the China affair is a complete failure. In my press conference I was asked with whom Japan should come to terms, Chiang or Wang. I said with the Chinese people, leave them free to choose whom they wished to have, it was not for us to tell them. I have said in every talk of
mine, that the Oriental subject people have their chance now to get free and rebuild their life and may be give a better lead to the world as a result of their suffering and victimisation but this was not possible while the China conflict went on and India would not be able to cooperate with Japan until this was terminated. Today I explained my position with regard to my frank talks that if the authorities feel uneasy, then there is no chance of our ever coming to understand each other’s point of view. So I am told they have no intention of placing any restrictions on me. So I think it is alright.

One gets so much more news here from India and other Eastern parts as there are so many business people constantly travelling up and down. There is very great discontentment and restlessness amongst the masses – widespread industrial strikes all over resulting in many clashes. Certain interested Indian parties have however introduced communal riots to divert people’s attention and energies, taking them into futile destructive channels. This has been possible because of the absence of any militant national program of fight.

One very interesting and significant thing is the revolt of the Indian troops. Those on the Thailand border fear a clash with Thailand people in the event of a war between Japan and England, so they have warned they will not fight the Thailand people… they insist they will only fight for India and none of Britain’s wars. In Iraq they have gone over to the Iraq troops and are now fighting with them against the British. This gives such a direct lie to all the communal propaganda. Here are these Hindu troops who have deserted their masters to fight shoulder to shoulder with Muslims, for their freedom against a common imperialist foe. The people all over fraternise.

The Axis seems to have sounded out the Indian Congress on an alignment but was badly rebuffed. It is impossible for us to look upon the fascist powers as the champions of liberty. The war is fast spreading to the borders of India. Did you see that
the Egyptian nationalists – Wafd Party – have threatened the Egyptian govt. that if it fails to resist the Br. efforts and gets dragged into the war, they will non-cooperate and launch a civil disobedience movement including non-payment of taxes. This is a great opportunity for all of us to cooperate and form a strong block not only against Br. Imperialism but also check Nazi expansion. But alas all our leaders are safe in prison, and Mr. Gandhi is the last person to make any such move. I feel so terribly distressed as I watch this drama unfolding itself and we isolated. I am sure the Soviet would have backed any such move. We would have had at least one strong power with us. It is a tragedy that all of our countries that should have been deciding factors have such hopeless leadership – Japan, China and India. What wonders we could have achieved, holding as we do between us nearly half the human race. Why do things go wrong like this?

I plan to go from here to Manchuria, Peking, Nanking, then Shanghai! You can reach me there up to the end of July, c/o American Express. Then I will plan for Chunkiang. I just don't see how I am going to get past Hongkong. One Indian lady connected with political groups through her husband came through from India a year ago and was not even allowed to leave her cabin in Hongkong while the boat was in the port, leave alone landing. Let us hope something will help me out. I have in any case asked for a passage direct from Shanghai…

Letter Two: Aomori. Japan 24th. May ’41

My dear Friends,

…I have traversed this entire Island and am now in the Northernmost tip – beyond is the ocean. This is a purely rural area with the highest density of population. The peasants seem a very sturdy hard working lot carrying on cultivation even on the hill sides, something people in your or my country don’t ever
need to do. But there seems so little that one can learn of the true facts. I feel very isolated and dumb as I go through the country hearing but the same sentimental patriotic talk with little to guide me on the information I would like to get.

The interest in India, is enormous. I am simply overwhelmed. My audiences even in these backward parts where rarely visitors come, run in to several thousands. They look so intensely interested and from the constant cheering they give expression to, I realise how intelligently appreciative they are – and they are mostly all farmers. This has been a great education to me and I feel in many ways compensated for all the want and ache in my own heart. For the first time they hear the real story of India and they respond so spontaneously. It is such a shame the world is led to believe human beings will always have jealousies and warring instincts and will eternally fight. The many become the victims of the few.

I notice very few women in these gatherings and I tell them how in my own country they come in large numbers, how actively they participate in the struggle, the many representatives elected to the legislatures, even in our cabinets. I hope they are impressed.

Nowhere had I been so impressed by women as in this country. The women in America are impressive – I am completely sold on their smartness and ability – but you have everything in the world to help you towards it. Here the odds against them are enormous. Rarely perhaps have the women been burdened the way they are here and yet so bravely carry on. The contrast between them and the men is far greater than in America. They are so much more intelligent and capable, more efficient and persevering. They are everywhere. They dominate all the industries and hard jobs. Alas they have no say in the nation’s affairs. Our Indian women settled in this country say they make ideal neighbours – the kindest and the most helpful but never gossip, never poke in unless they are wanted. What a compliment to say they don’t ever gossip. I think it is a golden quality, don’t you?
….I feel so lonely and lost. It is a new and different world to anything I have known. I feel considerable irritation, but above all I feel blind and dumb not being able to get a grip on things. The language barrier is a great obstacle too.

The Indian community in Japan consists mainly of business people, many of whom have now left due to war restrictions in both countries rendering business difficult. But unlike America it is very well organised, maybe because of its close contact with India, keeps a very solid national front. It has good contacts and enjoys considerable prestige. All these things have made my visit so much easier and afforded me many facilities.

… I keep missing you an awful lot. I am just so home-sick for America….

Very best wishes to you both and all other friends.

Letter Three: Imperial Hotel Japan, 7th July 1941

My dear friends,
I hope you received both letters I sent you earlier. I am writing this at the conclusion of my tour. You are no doubt surprised to find me still here. I am myself. The fact is that when I was about to leave for Manchuko, literally at the eleventh hour, the military authorities of occupation cancelled my permit. Needless to say I had secured it with considerable difficulty. It was issued by the Foreign Office here but the military authorities acted on their own. Of course I should not complain as I think to a certain extent [I was] responsible, particularly the visit to North China…. I spent 2 weeks in Tokyo meeting several leaders. One of the places that I talked was the Peers’ Club. I explained very clearly India’s conception of the new order, her fight against the present system, including feudalism. It brought forth some severe comments from one or two, especially my denunciation of Japan’s alliances – first with England and now with the Axis. But a good part of the audience was with me as I learnt later. One
professor said that Mr. Gandhi’s philosophy was also influenced by Marxism as he was opposed to capitalism!…

Another storm I raised – I never seemed to be able to open my mouth without raising volcanic eruptions – was over the question of women’s political rights. It is a sore point for they have no reasonable explanation to offer – it is simply indefensible. Very naively the men would tell me the Japanese women loved their home and were content with domestic duties – perfectly outrageous lie when 33% of them are in professions and 2 millions out of 5 millions of industrial workers are women. On one occasion, at a dinner, I brought this up. It was a very select gathering of the most famous intellectuals of Japan. I said supposing the women took the men’s argument literally and abandoned their newly acquired professions and went back to the kitchens, how would Japan keep going? This nearly caused an explosion. They are not used to “Oriental” women arguing. Imagine my misery when a Japanese woman came to the rescue of those men who had no answer. I was so ashamed of her letting women down the way she did!

I have greatly enjoyed the visit however. People have been so courteous and kind. I am so loaded with gifts. Everything that could be humanly done to make my visit pleasant and instructive was done. One of the organizations is still pleading with me to extend my stay, that it would be responsible for my stay, expenses, etc. I am generally impressed by the expressions of these people. Some of the public expressions about me are very interesting. Tokyo said I look more like a romantic poet than a politician. A farewell message hopes I shall be made the queen of free India. Lord, if only they knew.

One of the difficult and delicate points I had to clarify was not only India’s reaction to this New Asia Order, but also that of other countries of Asia. It is no use Japan presuming to look on such an immense continent with such diversities as Asia as though it were a backyard to breed a brood of chickens. The idea of building a “Family State” as children of the Emperor of Japan
would strike most of the Asiatics as fantastic. There is something so naive in the simple conception, I have had to pinch myself to make sure I am not dreaming a fantasy of the Middle Ages. The idea of going a couple of thousand years back, would sound preposterous to most people who have set their faces forward. I did my best to explain this, I don’t know with what success…. 

Not only the average intelligence here is far inferior to the average Indian, but also the leadership. Our leaders are infinitely superior in vision and intellect. But whereas all the suppression by imperialism has not succeeded in killing individual thought and the struggle for expression, here both are surprisingly absent. We love discussions, debates. It is almost the bane of our life, so it seems at times. This is why we don’t hesitate to differ even with such a leader as Mr. Gandhi. So there is a very essential difference in the two peoples, with its advantages and disadvantages for quick and speedy transformations…. They just don’t reason. That faculty has either been suppressed or never developed, don’t know which.

I am going direct to Shanghai on the 11th and will try to get my new bearings for India. These days one has to make plans from day to day.

Here is an interesting piece of news. Chiang-kai-shek sent a delegation to India to prevail on the Indian leaders to help England in her war effort. I suppose the British set him up to it. Imagine what a blow this must have been in India – how disillusioning. Isn’t the present situation pretty ironic for Britain and America in relation to the Soviet? These are anxious days. What a world we live in. I feel so alone and solitary here. Wish you folks were somewhere around. I will write again from Shanghai. Hope you are both well.

Kindest regards
Yours,

SIGNED
Kamaladevi
5th Sept. 1941

My dear Friends:

I was so delighted to have your letter of 23rd July. It was very kind of you to send me news of Rama.

I did go up to Chungking after all. It was some adventure. Our worst fears about Hongkong came true. Even before the boat came into the harbour, 2 military men boarded it, locked up my cabin and mounted guard. It happened to be a Br. ship, so it was easy for them. There the police came into my cabin and served me with a long list of prohibitory regulations. Then I was escorted under police “protection” to the hotel where friends had arranged for me to stay, and there I was interned. I was to hold no communication with anyone, by letter or telephone, not go beyond the square running around the hotel, not have a radio in my room, etc., etc. Worst of all, I was ordered to report myself daily to the police. This was on a Saturday and so until Monday the question of reporting was not going to come up. The Chinese leaders in Hongkong had arranged socials, all had to be cancelled. The whole thing was perfectly outrageous. To make matters worse, the plane service to Chunking was temporarily suspended due to continuous day or night bombing. If the plane did not resume service on Monday or if Hongkong authorities did not permit me to go, a serious situation would have arisen on Tuesday, as I had declared I would not report myself to the police like a criminal, which I was not. I am by instinct of habit a perfectly law abiding person and will not permit myself to be treated as a criminal. On Monday the plane got ready to go and also a telegram from the British Ambassador arrived asking Hongkong authorities to let me go. The Chinese Foreign Minister had approached the British Ambassador for intervention. So the police put me on the plane that night.

Instead of flying on to India from Chungking I decided to take the sea route, as the Indian communities along this route
have long been pressing me to visit them. When I came back to Hongkong to catch this boat, I was again taken charge of by the police at the air port. But this time I was determined I would not be coerced or bullied by them. I completely ignored the regulations which I was given to understand were still in force.

I moved all over Hongkong, attended all functions arranged for me and even addressed an audience where the China Defense League had a reception for me and Mme. Sun Yat Sen presided. I did not report myself to the police. I told them they could do their worst, but I would not submit to these insults. I may not be the terror they wish to make me out to be, but I can be what your slang would describe as a “tough guy” on such occasions. There were 4 days of suspense. But I simply did not bother – let things take their own turn. My arrest would have been too much of a sensation especially as I had come as the guest of Generalissimo and Mme. Chiang. And then there were all the Indian troops stationed there. And these troops in recent months have not been behaving as good boys should. There was, I believe, a telegram from the British Ambassador. He probably asked them to let me go quietly without creating further trouble. Anyways for appearances’ sake I brought lots of literature through the customs, which is not possible under the present regulations, without an O.K. from the censor. So here I am. I felt very mad, and very insulted, and I think it is best not to travel if one can’t do it with self respect…. 

The contrast in my arrival between Japan and Chungking China (I don’t want to brand all free China) was most ironical. There was a blaze of publicity in Japan, opportunity to address thousands through public meetings, every opportunity to meet groups for discussion, the prompt invitation from all officials to meet for talks. Of course I said very unpalatable things in Japan, still I got a chance to say what I wished to. But in Chungking, there was a systematic hush hush. My arrival was completely suppressed in the press for several days. The schedule did not
include meeting any political personalities or groups. I had to finally tell them I was not a tourist come for sightseeing. It was the British Ambassador that really helped me out. He understood the Chinese officials were jittery lest my presence annoy the British. So he gave the O. K. Until then I don't believe even the Generalissimo or Mme. Chiang were made aware of my arrival. Once they got the news, they invited me over. To some extent they made an effort to fill up the gaps in my schedule. Then they also announced I was their personal guest. Then came the first notice in the press! But it was an extremely circumscribed visit except for the long talks I had with my host or hostess, particularly she showed a very keen and intelligent interest in India. I found her sincere and realistic. She took, I think, a personal liking to me and we spent several hours together. She and the Generalissimo pressed me very much to stay in Chungking until the situation in India improved. They offered to get me fixed up as a lecturer at one of the universities. Anyway their attitude was very different from that of the officials except the Foreign Minister whom I knew in London and who had some conception of India's problems. But apart from these individuals, there is an appalling ignorance of India, far more so then in America or Japan.…

Their struggle on the economic front is very great – inflation, high cost of living, some of it due to corruption, hoarding, squeeze, etc. But it is also pathetic to see their military helplessness due to want of equipment. When these raids come on, the cities simply go underground or sit tight there. They have no fighters, so they don't fight back. I found it very maddening. I wish some of your state officials from Washington could be made to sit through those raids. In India we have simply accepted non-violence as a technique. But here it is different and even I so used to non-violence felt exasperated. I was impressed not only by the morale of the people but also by their marvelous adjustment to impossible conditions in their day to day life. There is something so simple and unostentatious about it – no
loud trumpeting, complete indifference to praise or blame. It shows a deep conviction with themselves of the righteousness of their cause. That impressed me very greatly.

... The British have got China to agree to supply men for protection of Burma. Of course China will have to do it since her communications will be endangered. But it is so like the British here to get everybody else except themselves to fight to preserve their empire – Indians, Chinese, Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians, and probably your boys in course of time. They had to use Indian troops even in Iran, in spite of the risk of their contacting the Red Army. I wonder if they will meet. It will be the first time in history!

I will be in Bombay on 23rd Sept. Mme. Chiang has sent many gifts for India as token of [her] interest.

With very best wishes to you both and other friends. Please give the news to others.

KAMALADEVI

NANKING

[This excerpt, and the one following on “Chungking”, are both from In War-torn China (Bombay: Padma Publications, 1942), 8–23.]

The route between Shanghai and Nanking which was once one of the main arteries of China, is today one of the most deserted and dismal. The land is fertile and one sees plenty of green and water everywhere. But so little of life. Big farms lie abandoned. The few homes that escaped destruction are falling into disuse.

The story of the Chinese migration is almost unprecedented in History. No exact figures are available but roughly 30 to 40 millions moved across this vast continent, over an area of 1,500 miles. Of these, ten millions were assisted by Government. It is inconceivable
that peasants sprung from their ancestral soil, tied to their land by tradition and sentiment, a land hallowed by faith and the bones of their ancestors, their one means of livelihood, should have so willingly left it at the call of their country. What indomitable spirit was it that moved them? What superb optimism? It is almost like a myth.

The devastation everywhere was great. The whole drama seemed to unfold itself as one crept up the roadway along which had moved Japan’s invading army. All along the line, every few yards stood a soldier with a pointed gun. There was a tense heaviness and strain in the atmosphere. The passengers were silent and only indulged in occasional whispers. Every time the train moved after the stop, uniformed men came along and searched the person of every passenger. At every station were the same long lines of men and women waiting, as at Shanghai.

Evening was creeping over the world bringing with it the twilight hush. The sharp angles of the landscape were being softened in the greying light. It was as though some kindly hand were trying to cover up even the gaping wounds in this torn countryside.

We were nearing Nanking. Suddenly I gave a gasp of thrill. There before me stood the Great Wall of China, even as it had stood through the centuries, a silent and gaunt witness to how many scenes and events. How childish and futile would seem today the effort to build a wall to shut out the world! Yet while the Maginot Line and the Stalin Line have cracked and collapsed, here stands this superb structure, ageless through the ages, immovable through swift moving time, almost a challenge to the ravage of time. It has withstood not merely the ruthless hand of time, it has defied the weapons of modern warfare. The Japanese brought their artillery to hammer on it – again and again, the columns were hurled against it to be broken in pieces, like delicate China dashed to the floor. In desperation the Japanese Command ordered the soldiers to scale this unbreakable wall – The suicide squads went forward. Each soldier as he reached the top became an easy target for the Chinese guns within the walls. One by one they fell like dry leaves softly slipping to the ground –
slowly the dead mounted up. The China Wall consists really of two walls running parallel to each other with a corridor between. This filled up slowly with the falling dead and on this bridge of corpses, the Japanese army secured a footing to pour into the city. Not only the Chinese, but today, even the Japanese, have a superstition about a wall that even modern batteries cannot pierce.

There was nobody to meet me at the Station as I had not intimated my arrival, not being sure of the train. No taxis were available. I took a bus to the hotel where I knew a room had been reserved for me. A few yards ahead at the City Gates, we were made to alight, and our bags gone through once again.

The place seemed oppressive, as I strolled out into the night. Here was a Ghost City. Even babies seemed to hush their cries. Long afterwards in Chungking I recalled this experience. What a contrast the two were; one was dead, even in the midst of quiet – the other, alive, while death rained around.

I met the members of the Wang-Chiang-Wei’s Government. Wang was the only impressive person in that group. Undoubtedly one of the ablest and cleverest, he was the right hand man of Dr. Sun, with General Chiang running a close race with him. In fact, so commendable were Wang’s interpretations of Dr. Sun’s principles that his books came to be prescribed as texts in Schools. Ten years ago Wang indulged in one of his usual coups to unseat Chiang and failed. The rivalry persisted. Intellectually, Wang may be superior. But he lacks Chiang’s driving power and strength of purpose. Each still proudly claims to be the one and only custodian of Dr. Sun’s teachings. Quiet, undaunted Madame Sun, however, is dissatisfied with both. All alone on the little island of Kowloon, a British possession, she is bravely struggling to keep green her husband’s principles.

The Wang Government is one of the most pathetic sights. Torn by internal conflicts, dominated by the Japanese Military, harassed by Chinese Terrorists, it drags on an unenviable existence. It has no army of its own and is completely at the mercy of the Japanese
Military. Wang has felt repeatedly humiliated by the Japanese Government’s continued attempts at rapprochement with General Chiang. Last summer he took a trip to Tokyo in great desperation. “You better decide whether you want Chiang or me,” he threatened. The Foreign Minister shrugged his shoulders and drawled out in the slow, sleepy way, so characteristic of the Japanese, “Is that so?”

*North China Daily News*, Wang’s paper made a vague comment: “Wang’s mission to Tokyo has not met with the success that was expected.” To pacify this recalcitrant and prevent a volte-face, the Japanese Government offered Wang a loan with which he was to purchase Japanese goods to meet Nanking’s needs. But Wang knew this was only a clever manoeuvre to get rid of and use the quantities of worthless Japanese paper *yen* strewn around the Shanghai Markets, and which everybody kept successfully smuggling into Japan much to the Government’s consternation.

Wang’s Government consists of formless opportunists and the Japanese Government is frequently called upon to compose their differences. Six months ago Wang expanded his Cabinet hoping to satisfy many of the disgruntled elements. Three months later, unable to cope with the squabbles, he took over most of the portfolios himself, nearly forcing a big crisis. A few days later, China was reverberating with one more bloody episode – an attempt on Wang, his inevitable hair-breadth escape, while all his body-guards were killed. This has been a frequent tale since the establishment of this Government. Wang is trusted by none, lest of all by Japan. The general impression is that he is Generalissimo Chiang’s own man, that when the erection of a Puppet Government became certain to Chiang’s discerning eye, he decided to put up his own man at its head. This is perhaps an unconscious tribute to Chiang’s brilliance.

**Chungking**

Chungking, the war-time capital of China, has in recent years become a veritable place of pilgrimage. The route to Chungking was
then limited to a single air service connected with Burma on the west, and Hongkong in the south. The air service is a daring venture that speaks volumes for the dogged determination of the Chinese. It has a waiting list longer than that of any other service in the world. Wide-eyed people with bated breath make this hazardous trip to see this wonder of a new world being created out of the ashes of the old.

The only feasible communication between the East and the West of China is the Yangtse River that literally flows down from the Szechwan Province where Chungking is situated. Eastwards, along which the industries and commerce of China grew, down to the main port of Shanghai – China’s main outer gateway. Up this river barges, heavily loaded with goods from the invaded area, were pulled by strong hands. Whole factories, school equipment, museum treasures, laboratories, motor cars, lorries, railway carriages, even rails and sleepers, in short anything that could be carried. For months the indefatigable Chinese dragged these heavy loads up this great waterway – their one unfailing line, to transplant old China on a new soil.

For weeks my attempts to contact Chungking by mail or telegraph had failed, shut in by Japanese censorship in Shanghai side and British censorship in Hongkong. Two powerful imperialist armies were blocking the only line of communication open. Finally an American friend succeeded in getting a message round via Manila: In 24 hours, arrangements to fly from Hongkong to Chungking were completed. I still had the biggest hurdle to cross – Hongkong. For two days I stormed up and down the room, held a virtual prisoner in my hotel in Hongkong. On the third day, in the early hours of the morning, I was put aboard the China clipper by the Hongkong authorities. The British Ambassador to China had intervened to get me out. Chungking had evidently not felt very happy to see a prospective guest of Generalissimo and Madame Chiang, detained.

Chungking balances itself on the hill tops, steep and severe like a fortress. The plane as it approaches the City, heaves over peaks, curves dangerously and bends in and out of hills and suddenly slips
on to a narrow stony strip of land along the Yangtse River. The usual generous open airport is not to be seen, nor the hospitable rest rooms. All around is bleak and barren, with sheer mountains rising on all sides. Two large cloth umbrellas shelter the few immigration and customs officials, while people stand around indifferent to the drizzle or the sun.

Where was the City and how did one get there, I puzzled. “You cross the river in a Sampan (a Chinese craft) and then get carried up in a sedan chair,” some one informed. In Chungking, you are either ascending or descending. Everything about Chungking is strenuous.

I had been told Chungking is hot and steaming, so I had not brought a single warm garment. After shivering all night in the plane, I shivered a little more when I landed. The cold ate into my bones as I sat in the air raid shelter. Two hours later, by afternoon I was sweating. I retired to bed lightly clad, fanning myself. By midnight, I had slipped under two blankets; by morning I was crying for more. Chungking weather makes the notorious English weather seem sober and normal.

According to all reports, the ravages in Chungking are far greater than in London except that the former does not get the same publicity. I landed myself in one of the worst raids of the season, continuous for nine days and nights with short respites no longer than a couple of hours.

The first severe raids on Chungking transformed the midtown section of the city into a mad inferno of flames. Seven huge conflagrations were counted at nightfall, roaring through the heart of the city in a swath a mile and a half wide and a half mile broad. By the time night fell the red glow of the flames illuminated the countryside for mile around.

The conflagration razed four-fifths of Chungking’s once busy down-town district. Streets, lanes, and shops and civilian quarters were turned into heaps of charred ruins, and in between them stood a forest of gaunt walls bearing testimony to the city that once was.

Forces of reconstruction began to work immediately. Chungking
city was given a new facade. Most of the old buildings, four or five stories high, were gone after the attacks. Out of the ruins rose mostly one story, but nevertheless bright and compact, shops and houses.

A walk along Chungking’s main thoroughfares will find every shop busy and the streets thronged with pedestrians and vehicles. Life is carried on in hastily improvised structures, built out of material retrieved from the ruins. Buses are crowded to capacity.

In spite of continuous raids, life goes on as best as it can. Offices start work before seven and put in two to three hours of work until the bombers arrive. After the all-clear is given late in the afternoon, work is resumed again. But it is not quite so simple as all that. The experience is pretty shattering. On an average, well over a hundred planes a day come in four waves of 27 to 30 each, sometimes, even over 60 planes at a time, and on the average, each plane drops six to eight bombs, depending on the weight of the missiles.

The Japanese, luckily for China, are not very happy navigators. They rarely come when weather is bad. So, bad weather is good weather in Chungking. Moonless nights are also comparatively free from raids. But the raids have increased in intensity from year to year. Yet, more people have kept coming into the city and there is more business all round. Even as the all-clear sounds, the clean-up men get busy. Linesmen try to hitch up the wires by evening. People, bombed out of their homes and shops, collect what is left; straightaway start building temporary shacks, prepare tea over camp fires, and share their troubles with the neighbours. There is an air of friendliness and comradeship, no sign of panic or despair. Some times the bombs fall into the river bringing to the surface such fish as had never been seen before, a boon to the fishermen.

The A. R. P. [Air Raid Precautions] system is one of the best in the world. People come from all parts of the globe to study it. China has two unique advantages, mountains and vast area. The mountains offer unlimited shelters – caves – blasted out of rocks – that can house nearly all the population of a city in perfect safety, so nobody need get killed except through personal negligence.
The 500 metre tunnel in the down-town section of Chungking as an air raid shelter has today become one of the wonders of the world. In the early days it was the scene of a great tragedy, when hundreds died, suffocated due to lack of air. Today, however, efforts have been made to make conditions relatively safe. The tunnel has three entrances, one straight, the other two, through a descending 20 metre sloping stairway. As a protection against splinters, a thick stone wall has been built. A 50 metre space in the middle of the tunnel has been marked off to be left, open with a wire fence set up to bar people from this section which leads to a dead end. At the safe rate of 10 people for each metre there is total accommodation for 4,100 persons. On one side are two rows of seats, one row consisting of benches and another of air tight wooden boxes. The seats on the other side are stones. A drainage system keeps water away from the tunnel. The power for lighting and ventilating is generated by a Diesel Engine installed in a room beside the entrance and run on vegetable oil.

The enemy planes have to traverse long areas of free China before getting to their objectives. This gives the cities a fairly long warning. Two methods are used: On every hilltop is a pole; when the Japanese scouting planes start, a triangle is displayed. When the bombing planes take off from their bases, a big red ball is hoisted; when they enter the province, two red balls go up; and when they near the city, both the balls come down. With the first ball, the people start packing and getting ready for the shelters. The second warning finds them on the march. This is indeed an impressive sight – hundreds of thousands walking in single file, in perfect order and discipline, in complete silence, carrying their precious belongings, babies strapped to the backs of women, occasionally swinging the sick or the disabled! Each is supplied with a ticket marked with the number of the shelter allotted to each. Only in that particular shelter, will the holder of that ticket be admitted. Nobody is permitted to leave before the all-clear is given.

There is another mode of warning, more graphic, but works with the same clock-work precision. At every cross-road is installed a huge
circular board, representing a sort of a map. The centre is painted red to indicate the City. In the distance are marked the Japanese bases, with a couple of toy planes at rest. When the bombers begin their journey the toy planes begin to move on the board. Every few intervals, the listening-in posts throughout the area these bombing planes are traversing, keep on sending messages to the Capital, giving the exact position of the planes. So, in roughly over two hours, one can arrange one’s schedule, watching this, as one would the hands of a clock. I once did a whole morning’s shopping with its aid.

The baptism of fire, which Chungking underwent in the past two summers, helped in the construction of new roads. As a result of the extensive destruction, streets were widened, the ground was levelled, and old houses were razed to make way for new roads.

When many eating-houses were destroyed in air raids, the Bureau of Social Affairs of the Chungking Municipal Government opened fourteen public dining halls serving food at prices much lower than those charged in ordinary restaurants. The bureau also purchased cooking utensils, bowls, chopsticks and spoons to give to those made homeless by raids.

To check unreasonable increases in commodity prices, the authorities have also established a chain of public stores supplying daily necessities to the public at prices lower than those quoted on the market.

…

Headquarters of China’s gigantic forces of resistance and reconstruction, Chungking, while it lacks Peiping’s imposing structures, has a superb moral stature that has brought it the world’s homage. Here are gathered today experienced men and women that have gone into voluntary exile for national freedom’s sake. Here, they pool their knowledge to serve their country’s cause, isolated from the world, struggling to live on limited supplies….
THE AWAKENING OF ASIA

[For centuries Asia with the exception of Japan, has been ruthlessly exploited by the Western powers. Today a golden opportunity opens out before Asia, the land which has put greater sanctity on human life than on political power, laid greater store by wisdom than wealth, and who once inspired all humanity with its moral codes. But today the people of Asia and the world must be made to realise that the political and economic emancipation of retarded continents like Asia and Africa have a direct bearing upon the question of world peace. This is the great task facing the Inter-Asian Relations Conference meeting in Delhi today.]

KC.

INDIA and the countries of Asia have from early times been influencing one another. Though the ties may have loosened and thinned at times, the ancient thread has never quite snapped.

In many ways, each has reflected the other in its hopes and aspirations, in its struggles and trials, in its achievements and successes. Each country carries within its heart a miniature Asia even as Asia poses the problem of each of its countries.

Over the horizon obscured by international clashes, a discerning vision can clearly see the mighty continental shift from West to East. The Orient is spot-lighted once again as out of a gigantic convulsion emerges a revitalised Asian people with freedom in its heart and revolution on its lips. From Cairo to Canton, moved by a single impulse, the millions instinctively turn inwards to gaze into the heart of this giant land which has cradled them through colourful centuries of triumph and glory and sheltered them through the dark weary storms of oppression and domination. The night has been long and the streaks of pearly pink still faint, yet they hold the promise of refulgent radiance as in their struggling rays we stretch forth our hands in the glad hour of our new birth even as we did in the poignant hour of our anguish.
The gradual attainment to nationhood of the long-enslaved peoples naturally stimulates in them the desire to revive the embers of old, faded friendships and weave afresh the decayed threads of Asian relations. In this context a brief survey of the past is an essential imperative which will provide both a wider background to the present as well as sound the right key to an understanding that will have to form the base for the Inter-Asian structure of tomorrow. The underlying close resemblance between the various nationals of Asia which was once a living experience is today a toneless instrument which only a vigorous touch can galvanise into resonant harmonies.

For, consequent on the subordination of these countries by non-Asian powers, the vital ties slumped and relationship soon became only a dim memory, during the last century and a half. Religion and culture had, like the radiating morning rays once wafted over these lands, lacing them into harmonious designs – Islam, Hinduism and Buddhism – the last named flinging out the longest area. For Buddhism as the rebellious child of Hinduism, proved a vigorous influence linking India with the Far East. Similarly the advent of Muslims into India and the absorption of Islamic culture into a synthesis of re-orientalised Indian culture, forged closer ties between India and the Middle East. India has in a way continued to remain the cultural clearing-house for Asia, standing as the meeting point of the delicate traceries of the Far East with the rich multi-tones of the Middle East.

Although the central pivot is moving eastwards again the power and strength which alone can give stability and permanence to this giant shift, has still to be generated. Except Japan, practically every country of Asia has been subject to the domination of Western imperialism and, to use a hackneyed phrase, none is yet out of the woods. The domination has been mostly direct or colonial as it is termed; but in a few cases indirect or semi-colonial. This fact necessarily lends some broad common features to all the countries of this mighty continent. For, national economy has been impeded by the domination of foreign economic interests so that the former could not attain to its full stature. The common features are: general economic backwardness;
being highly ruralised; low material conditions; great population pressure on land. Colonial or semi-colonial economy is characterised by its subservience to the interests of the ruling country which either through the exercise of its military or economic pressure, or both, bends the subject country’s economy to supplement its own – in other words the colonies remain mainly sources of raw material to feed the industrial hunger of the metropolitan dragon and in turn become one of its chief consuming markets. This sets a general pattern for the entire economy of the colonial country, its currency, exchange, banking, transport, trade, shipping, and all aspects of commerce. With technological development as production assumed gigantic proportions the whole colonial economy has had to be closely geared to these rapid changes. Food crops systematically give way to commercial, and specialisation in specific primary commodities such as for instance cotton and jute in India, rubber and tin in Malaya, tea in Ceylon, sugarcane in Java, rice in Burma, Thailand, etc. From this has followed logically the devising of the railway rate structure and the designing of communications so as to facilitate transport of raw materials to ports and of manufactured import articles from the ships to internal market centres. Likewise with trade, it is almost exclusively confined to the ruling country. Latterly to meet the growth of national sufficiency policies in the non-Empire countries, the Empire countries have developed imperial preference, which is an intensive form of colonial exploitation. The organising of primary products for export to overseas markets instead of to meet the internal needs of the masses, places the economy on a footing of helpless dependence on the high-power industrial economy of the metropolitan country, not to speak of the pitiable instability which such a condition infuses into the whole set-up.

In the countries directly controlled, the administration formulates currency, exchange and finance policies to aid the imperialist interest as we have long experienced in this country. The colonial country is restricted to the same currency sphere as the ruling one, its loans are floated mainly in the metropolitan capitals and held by its ruling
class; the debt is usually diverted into non-productive channels and to consume the metropolitan country’s products; and its structure governed by the necessity of maintaining favourable trade balance to meet the interest charges, for there is always a wide disparity between the total debt of the colonics and the corresponding assets created by capital expenditure, making this debt one of the instruments for the exploitation of the colonial masses for the benefit of the imperialist ruling power. The tax-structure too betrays a similarity, indirect taxation being an important characteristic, revenue being mostly derived from customs, excise, land, etc., which makes the system regressive. On the expenditure side, defence services, police, heavily paid top-services (mainly foreign or consisting of picked imperialist stooges), swallow up the major portion of the revenues leaving a small fraction for nation-building items such as education, social services, public health and the like.

In semi-colonial countries, the exploitation is mainly through financial investment and the utilisation of cheap colonial labour, and often control over trade and tariff as well. It is out of this economic morass that Asia has to extricate herself and set her wheels on the road of national economy. A national economy is an independent economy whose first objective is to raise both the productive capacity of the entire country and at the same time per capita income by a more general distribution of the national wealth. The tasks before every country of Asia today are twofold: emancipation from the foreign stranglehold; an equitable distribution of the increased production. Into this reorganisation will have to be fitted such indispensable items as social services, co-operative ownership and production, elimination of the wide disparity in income-groups to make national prosperity a living reality to the wide masses of each country. The single magic word industrialisation, once the dream of every frustrated colonial, we know today cannot create for us the free society we strive for. For industrialisation in a capitalist economy inevitably brings in its wake many complicated problems through the complexities of modern industrial structure.
This has not only led to direct State intervention generally for the purpose of safeguarding the rights and interests of all citizens, particularly such as the poorer classes who in the present social structure stand heavily handicapped, but also transformed social services from the philanthropy phase to the constitutional. Social measures are now being more and more incorporated as the basic foundations of national constitutions in all modern countries. At all times for the smooth working of any economy with efficiency and benefit, planning is essential; much more so in the transformation from a colonial to a national economy.

Really speaking, in the modern world set-up, there is no such thing as a strict national self-sufficiency. Our economic and social needs have become too complex and multi-phased to be circumscribed by lines that conform to accidental national frontiers which are resolved by other accidental factors and not by the economic laws of want and satisfaction. In spite of centuries of industrial experience chaos and distress, Europe has never betrayed any intelligent attempt to organise its economy on a continental basis, except at the machine-gun and bombing point, that too not to bring greater prosperity or comfort to the vast masses but to expand the field of exploitation and to entrench the ruling dictators more securely into power.

A golden opportunity today opens out before Asia – a land which has put greater sanctity on human life than on political power, laid greater store by wisdom than wealth, who once inspired all humanity with its moral codes and taught the immortal lesson that it is by the common man that a people is evaluated. Today Asia can give a lead in another realistic field.

A transition from a slave to a free economy calls for gigantic adjustments. Nor is the change over as simple as nebulous nationalism tries to make out. The recent World War has completely thrown out of gear the entire world economy. We are confronted by tantalisingly contradictory factors. Whilst production has accelerated by leaps and bounds, we are equally confronted by staggering scarcity on an unprecedented scale. While profits have soared, real incomes have
fallen. Black markets have come to be the normal feature of our everyday life. Even as agricultural prices have risen, the condition of agricultural labour has become more depressed. The disparity between the rural and urban communities has sharpened more than ever.

A national economy implies freedom from dependence on foreign credit and foreign markets. If this is to be achieved, it would be immensely advantageous for the Asian countries to enter upon a joint plan for the purpose of pooling together economic resources as well as experience. In a predominantly agricultural economy in which Asia finds herself, the pattern of future land tenure is of crucial importance. So also the basis of its industrial structure. Study and experiment in collective and cooperative farming and above all the elimination of the tragic lag between rural and urban standards of income and living are imperative. The rural economy needs to be put on a national basis and mechanised development to be intelligently and realistically related to rural production, so that the former does not depress or destroy the latter; intensive cultivation, agriculture in relation to exports, all need reorientation, equally with industry. The advisability of nationalisation of large-scale industries, the development of cottage industries by the State, through industrial cooperatives, closer association of labour with production generally, all such vital matters should be decided on as common policies to be pursued with the closest possible cooperation between the countries on the basis of perfect equality and mutual benefit, collecting in a common pool the stimulus of common adventure and the harvest of rich experience for the express purpose of freeing Asia and its teeming billions not only from the thraldom of foreign vested interests, but the equally oppressive indigenous big interests. For there is today a growing tendency in the first instance of local vested interests allying themselves with the foreign, and in the second of entrenching their influence in the new national governments that are rising. Both have to be effectively combated. This is only possible if the people's representatives from each country come together and with a realistic vision and a broad social outlook plan for the new Asia. All economic
plans for co-operation should be in terms of the vast long-exploited masses. The people of Asia and of the world must be made to realise that the political and economic emancipation of retarded continents like Asia and Africa have a direct bearing upon the question of world peace. For it is in direct proportion to the strength, political and economic, generated by these continents that the reactionary forces of exploitation retreat. This should be the target of the Asian Relations Assembly, and make the future structure of this continent the dynamo for world progress.

THE PEOPLE OF AFRICA

[From At the Cross-Roads, ed. Yusuf Meherally (Bombay: National Information and Publications, 1947), 186-95.]

India’s raising the question of discrimination against Indians in South Africa, before the U.N.O., posed before the world not so much the problem of the nationals of a country but in reality the fundamental question of racial discrimination and one of the basic factors in imperialist exploitation. The point is of particular interest at a time when the entire shape of empires and colonies is in the melting pot and the bona fides of the so-called British Commonwealth is on trial.

Just as the political emphasis shifted to Asia in World War I, the emphasis since World War II has been shifting to Africa, which very definitely is going to be the dice in the imperialist games of tomorrow. Slowly but surely as the West as a ruling power is being pushed out of Asia, it is seeking to entrench itself in Africa. It is fast becoming the White Man’s economic and military base. This is most evident in the case of Britain, whose “liquidation” of the empire is threatening to take the shape of special concentration in a single continent like Africa.

To most people, especially in the West, 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.

Three quarters of the population and four-fifths of the area of Britain’s colonial empire are as a matter of fact concentrated in Africa covering an area of two million square miles. Indeed the end of World War I saw the best parts of Tropical Africa come into British hands and it would be no exaggeration to say that the future of Africa is at the moment controlled by them.

The British area is divided into 14 dependencies for the administration of which all the human ingenuities the seasoned Britishers are capable of, have devised a variety of forms: Crown Colonies, Protectorates, Mandates, High Commissioners’ territories. But they all conform to a broad pattern: the central authority vested in a Governor appointed by the Colonial Office in London, assisted by an Executive Council consisting of permanent officials also appointed by the Colonial Office, and advised by a Legislative Council with a majority of official members.

The non-official sprinkling is done either by nomination or election according to the particular procedure in each country. The Legislature has no power; the Governor has the right of veto. The colonies are governed by a bureaucracy subject to no popular control.

As for the nature of the occupation of land, wherever there is a White settler colony, the Africans are generally kept out, although the latter number 32,500,000 as against the 3,500,000 white rulers. This is not surprising for the European era in Africa commenced with the auction of Negro slaves. As Dr. Theal, the historian of South Africa, points out: “The system of Negro slavery caused the colonists to regard the coloured man as property, the hewer of wood and the drawer of water.” Thus where the Boers established a republic in Transvaal, its constitution unashamedly stated: “There shall be no equality between the White and the Black either in Church or State.” The saga of the White Man’s rule in Africa is one of ignominy and inhumaneness. The children of the soil have been made aliens in their own land, denied common civic rights, debarred from public
places, cinemas, gardens, museums, libraries, etc. Segregated in trams and trains; confined to “reservations” like birds in poultry pens; banned from trade in urban areas; allowed to visit certain areas only by permits as though they were habitual criminals. Some fifty-thousand workers are arrested annually merely for violation of such laws. Innumerable regulations have been enacted to keep them on the White Man’s farms in semi-slavery. The mouths of those who attempted to protest, are gagged.

Reserved Areas

Of the African’s three assets, land, cattle and labour, land is the most vital. Yet for all the size of the country, land has become the scarcest and most precious commodity. For while the people are fundamentally agricultural and a long time will have to pass before they can get settled into substitute occupations, more and more of the land has been alienated to the Europeans.

Then came the special “reserved areas” for the Africans. At the start the chiefs themselves in the face of an alarming encroachment favoured this plan hoping to secure some land for themselves. But in truth the idea was for exactly opposite reasons; that the Africans should be removed from all the lands favoured by the Europeans and they should be left free for untrammelled possession. In the process, the European requirements were grossly exaggerated and millions of acres of extra lands were evacuated and taken possession of.

On one side is this land being kept uncultivated and empty, awaiting an absent European demand. It has come to be known as the “Silent Land.” On the other, overcrowdedness. The Commission on the Financial and Economic position of N. Rhodesia, or the Pim Report as it is called, said: “In the district of Abercorn 5½ million acres of land are reserved for European settlement of which 100,000 have actually been alienated and of these barely 500 acres are actually under cultivation.” While in the Fort Jameson district with an area of 500,000 acres and a population of 54,000 natives, conditions are described as follows: “It is inhabited by two cattle-breeding tribes,
but one-third of the area is useless for cattle being infested with flies; for the same reason, as also scarcity of water, a quarter of the reserve is uninhabited… for some 41 square miles the density of population is 119 per square mile.”

…

Mineral Wealth

Let us now turn to industries and labour. In modern economy credit and modern implements are supreme. In the colonies the Europeans alone have possessed these and acquired the most promising of the country's riches and have therefore dominated its entire economy. In the British African colonies, of the 200 million pounds invested by Europeans, as much as 163 million is by investors residing in England and 30 million by Europeans settled in the colonies. The greater part of this was in mines, which has meant European mining interests digging up the mineral wealth and sending it abroad, the distribution of profits abroad and paying a large share of the taxes on them into the British Treasury. Naturally this has brought little benefit to the people of the colonies. The profits earned by the European settlers have been mainly spent to acquire amenities and public services for themselves.

The African producer has remained without capital or modern industrial equipment and with virtually no opportunity for accumulating capital of his own; arid capital has been the lubricating oil that moves the modern machine of economy. With agriculture and cattle-breeding failing, it is not surprising that Africans should desert their villages in thousands to eke out their existence in mines or other European-owned industries. In some of the provinces, 60 to 70 per cent of the adults are normally absent from their villages, resulting in the disruption of the social framework and break-up of family life. The Provincial Commissioners’ annual reports graphically state this: “The prolonged absence of able-bodied males and village elders has a detrimental effect… large numbers of women suffer constant hardship or are compelled to seek work on the plantations in order to clothe themselves…. Gradual depopulation is taking
place, huts are in disrepair and there is a decrease in the acreage of lands under cultivation.”

**High Wages**

The Pim Report describing the lack of any means for the production of wealth, records: “Such a state of affairs naturally renders ready money scarce; the tax can only be found with difficulty.”

In consequence an exodus to secure wages in cash is inevitable … the spectacle is presented of an underfed, weakly population with best of its elements drained away by the distant lure of “high wages.” In cash, however, these “high wages” worked out to the grand sum of £6 a year. Pressing on this broken humanity was the tax from 7s. 6d. to 15s. annually from every male member.

“It is obvious,” says the Pim Report, “that over large areas the local resources of the country are entirely inadequate to provide the tax-payer with the means to pay the amount.” For the Report elaborates its investigations which had shown an average income of 1-8-3 pounds per capita.

**Spectacular Profits**

Mining has been the chief industry – gold, diamonds, and manganese. The State having made no claims to the country’s mineral wealth, there are neither rights nor regulations to control grant of concessions. Mining has been left untrammeled in the hands of private capitalists who have been able successfully to hoodwink the ignorant chiefs and win concessions on fantastically easy terms. Government has further aided the companies by imposing very little in the way of taxes. The entire income-tax is paid by them in England. Their earnings have been spectacular.

The Ashanti Gold Fields Corporation which is responsible for half the country’s gold production, paid from 1929 up to the outbreak of the war, 100 per cent in dividends and 50 per cent to 100 per cent bonus in fully paid shares or cash bonus. Several other gold and diamond mining companies have been paying the same.
As against this, the rents demanded from these companies are very low and fixed, irrespective of the profits, the maximum rarely exceeding 300 to 400 pounds; while the net profits on the eve of the war were in the neighbourhood of 5 million and more. At the same time the wages of a worker worked out to 26-10-0 pounds a year on 1s. 5d. a day. The maximum in taxes amounted to about 400,000 pounds. It is estimated that on an average the annual mineral exports come to 6 million (they rose to 12 in 1937-38) monies taken out of the country figure around 3 million while about a couple of millions are left in the country.

It is inevitable under the circumstances that the country’s prosperity should come to depend on the prosperity of the two industries, mining and cocoa plantations, which between them compose 70 per cent of the country’s exports. Next comes copper whose exports reached the value of ten million pounds a year, half of this sum being taken directly out of the country to pay shareholders, directors, etc.; about a million pounds paid annually in salaries to a few white men, while the African workers who number ten times as many, receive between them a quarter of that sum earning from 6d. to 1s. a day! And those very men have to pay 15s. a year in tax. The wage figures of the South African Union reveal an interesting tale. In 1939, 55,008 white workers received an aggregate of 21,104,467 pounds while the non-Europeans received 14,129,172 pounds – which means that eight times as many African workers received only two-thirds of the total wage sum of the European workers.

**Tuberculisation**

Only since World War II has legislation been introduced to recognise trade unionism. Yet even now there are discriminatory clauses in the legislation operating against African workers. For instance, in South Africa, legislation such as Workmen’s Compensation Act, Industrial Conciliation Act, [and] Unemployment Benefit Act do not cover the African workers.

The net result of this system is that there is no adequate provision
for public services. The absence of statistics shrouds facts. According to the Native Affairs Annual Report, “Mortality is about 22 per cent under one year and 56 per cent between one and three years. These figures do not include children who die at birth. The spread of diseases is recognised. The medical Report for 1938–39 says: “The experiment of other African territories indicates that one must expect a steady and probably rapid tuberculisation of the native population.” The Pim Report says: “… There is a considerable amount of relapsing fever. Leprosy is widespread; above all syphilis is a scourge and the proportion of infection very high.” On the floor of the Legislature, Captain Smith said in 1939: “I am told there is practically no infant native in this country who has not got malarial infection and over half of them enlarged spleens.” The Pim Report further states: “… The Public health service is very inadequate and practically no maternity or child welfare work has been done. There is an actual water shortage in many native areas. The existing position ought not to be allowed to continue.”

**Malnutrition**

One of the most potent factors in the obvious ill-health of the Africans, is malnutrition. The Committee on Nutrition in the Colonial Empire pronounces its verdict as follows: “Food deficiency is a predisposing factor in many local disease conditions. Tuberculosis, pneumonia, and bronchitis are very prevalent and together account for 30 per cent of the deaths. Over 70 per cent of persons in the coastal towns give evidence of tubercular infection… there seems to be a close relationship between nutrition and the incidence of leprosy in certain areas.”

African education is on a par with African health. Until 1945 there was not even a Government department for the Africans’ education. A separate department was created only in 1930. Even now the few schools are confined to urban areas.

These conditions have been strengthened rather than weakened by the war. Huge war profits have added more power to the domination of European vested interests.
The African problem is a world problem, 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 and a rational attitude towards them.

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The Struggle of Viet Nam Against French Imperialism

[First published in Modern Review 81 (April 1947), 189–92.]

The deadly struggle of the Viet Nam Republic of Indo-China against French Imperialism, with almost its back to the wall, throws into sharp relief the fact that Asia is still fighting her major and probably the last battle to free herself from the thraldom of the European yoke.

A new alignment of forces shaped in the South-East Asia as a result of the collapse of Japan and the break-up of her Empire. This meant in particular a re-adjustment of the relations between the old colonies of Europe and their former rulers. In a way, the surrender of Japan far from restoring these colonies to their old master, actually paved the way for their liberation. For the interval between the Japanese collapse and the re-entry of the European forces was availed of by them to seize power and declare their independence. But subsequent events have proved that the question of colonial freedom is not to be so simply solved. In the first place, the economy of every imperialist country is based on the resources of its colony or colonies. Deprived of this basic prop, the ruling country’s economy would most certainly collapse unless an inner revolution at the same time transformed its own structure. In the absence of any such radical change, the ruling power is bound to exert its hardest to retain its colonial empire, modified no doubt to the extent the colonial struggle can bend it through its up-surging pressure. This is today being witnessed in Indo-China, Indonesia, the Philippines, India, Burma, etc. Of these revolts, the least known and probably the
bloodiest was the Indo-Chinese struggle stemmed in the first instance by British troops aided by their Indian units, who tried to hold the imperialist fort until the arrival of the French who then resumed the battle against the brave Indo-Chinese patriots. Although the newborn and sturdy Republic of Indo-China comprising the Provinces of Annam, Tonkin and Cochin China could not be destroyed, it is nevertheless sought to be softened up at least for the time being, by the imperialist armed forces, for otherwise such a prolonged and bitter war could not have been continued to be waged against the Indo-Chinese Republic by France.

What makes these struggles so significant in the present context is the changed face of Europe and the seeming transformation in the internal character of the old countries. For instance, France has today a definitely Left Government, dominated as it is by Socialists and Communists, guided by a new leadership that the debacle caused by the war and the militant elements thrown up by the resistance movement, had combined to create. The last general election clearly showed the mood of the country in the definite swing to the Left as demonstrated in the success of the Socialist and Communist Parties. Yet whatever transformation may have taken place within France itself, as a result of the Leftward swerve, it is little reflected in its empire policy. A truly Socialist cum Communist government’s first act would have been the adoption of measures for the liquidation of its Empire. Far from doing so, one sees in the fierce war waged against Indo-China by Franco a stern determination to hold on to whatever it has. This has become all the more sinister as attempts are being made to create the impression that colonies have ceased to be paying propositions that they once were, and that on the contrary they have now become liabilities for the ruling countries. The question is of interest to every country similarly placed whether it be India, Indo-China or Burma. For, in the first instance, all empire economies are alike as is being increasingly realised. Even little islands like the Philippines which because of their diminutive rise do not appear to occupy a prominent position in the economy of the United
States, nevertheless had obviously a far more important bearing on the U.S. foreign economy than the world realised; for they are now compelling the U.S. to enact such legislative measures through the U.S. Congress as will enable that country to still continue to retain its grip on these Islands in spite of the grant of political freedom to them. How much more so in the case of an enormously rich area like Indo-China which Albert Sarraut when he was Minister for Colonies before World War II, described as follows:

“Indo-China is from every point of view the most important, the most developed and the most prosperous of our colonies…. What is to be the future of this rich and varied patrimony of ours which is the source of French political, intellectual and moral influence in the Pacific? By what dangers is it threatened and how can we overcome them?”

It is against this background that we must survey the problem of Indo-China to get a correct estimate of its position in France’s scheme of things.

French advent into the Far East and the development of its contacts in the Pacific dates further back than her territorial occupations in that area. French Jesuit Missionaries were said to have wielded some influence at the Chinese Court in Peking in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. From the first France had arrogated to herself a special role amongst the Western powers as the only Catholic power and in virtue of that to be protector of Catholics and Catholic Missions, which only later came to be challenged by other European Catholics. On the basis of this claim under the Treaty between France and China, all Missionaries going into the interior of Chia had to have passports issued by the French Diplomatic representation. Further privileges to these Catholic Missions were conceded in the shape of permits for the acquisition of land, a system which resulted in what came to be known as the “Protectorate of France in China.” Henceforward, the French were allowed to lease or buy land or houses in any part of that country. After 1840, a period of commercial activity followed with the close of the Opium War, leading from
1860 onwards to the era of rapid conquest and penetration into Indo-China. It is well known that for a long time China like Japan resisted the efforts of the West to get her ports opened to Western trade, and that she yielded eventually only to the forceful measures taken by the Western powers to gain permission for their nationals to settle and trade in some parts of China. But undoubtedly as was admitted in 1936 by Albert Sarraut, it was Indo-China that played a vital role in determining the place of France in the Far East economy. That French private investments in Indo-China have all along been on an ascending scale is easily proved by figures. Between 1888 and 1918 they totalled 492 million francs; between 1924 and 1930, 2870 million francs; after 1936, a fresh influx of capital came in and rose to 3250 million francs. On the eve of World War II, the total investments of all kinds, private and Government, totalled more than 12 million francs. Moreover, Indo-China's trade with France at the time exceeded her trade with the countries of the Far East by almost double. The Indo-Chinese rubber exported to France was virtually equal to the net imports of crude rubber into that country. The French Armament industry was richly fed by the presence of Nickel and Iron ore (the latter having quadrupled production by the eve of World War II), Chrome, Tungsten, Manganese, Antimony, Bauxite and other minerals from Indo-China. Despite all this mineral wealth, the French economic policy had been to preserve this Colony and its resources of raw materials for its own exclusive exploitation and had therefore discouraged the establishment of any national industries. As in other colonies so in Indo-China, her wealth only went to build the armament industry of the ruling country, thus making France's Far Eastern possessions utterly helpless and vulnerable to attacks; for the necessary war equipment that might have made resistance to outside aggression practicable was too far off to be of any use, not to speak of the precarious condition of France itself making the chances of any such help unreal. For years the possibility of industrialising Indo-China to meet just such a situation, particularly after the experience of World War I, had been
discussed many a time but the fear of French manufacturers that this might mean competition from that colony, had successfully torpedoed the very suggestion. There was also opposition from the French Army of occupation who feared urbanisation and the rise of a proletariat class with the possibility of its becoming the breeding ground for revolt and political discontentment. The impeding crisis of 1939 again brought this question to the forefront and the desirability of raising an Indo-Chinese Army under its own flag and staffed by its own officers was advocated by many as the only means of persuading that colony to offer effective resistance. It was also hoped that these measures would absorb the young unemployed of Indo-China and serve to divert the attention and energies of the political malcontents into defensive channels, give them a stake in the resistance and replace the prevailing indifference with the will to resist. But every such reasonable suggestion was met by the colonial reactionaries with the query, “Is France to lose her third empire?” The blind colonial militarists saw greater security in the doubtful supply of armaments from the home country than in local popular enthusiasm which to them was suspect. The only measures taken to meet the insecurity were new taxes – taxes on exports, imports, consumption, and on every conceivable thing, to add to the already existing burden.

The policy of continued appeasement towards Axis powers served to gradually take the initiative away from the French in the Pacific. Efforts brought to rouse, and rally Indo-Chinese support in the war effort brought but lukewarm response except from vested interests under French protection like the Emperor of Annam and similar dignitaries. The capitulation of Europe served to inflame Japanese expansionist dreams and in this hour they saw Japan’s opportunity to expand her sphere of influence in South-East Asia and overcome her dependence on foreign raw material. She realized that Indo-China’s rice, iron, coal, rubber and wealth could supply a sizeable part of her own pressing economic needs. Equally important was this colony’s strategic position, enhanced by the excellent harbour at Camrauh
Bay, and with this in hand the whole of Eastern Asia up to India seemed within command. Moreover, Indo-China hardly has any armed force worth the name.

Indo-China, it was now obvious, was going to play an important role in the Japanese New Order. On June 17th, the day Marshal Petain sued for peace, the Japanese Foreign office called on France to stop armament shipments into China through Indo-China and as an earnest of their seriousness moved units of the army and navy on to the Indo-China border, and later established control stations within that country in all important cities and ports. These Japanese military missions in Indo-China though ostensibly to stop supplies to China, enabled Japan to obtain de facto control of that country and through the Asia Development Board plan the re-orientation of the Indo-Chinese economic life within the Yen block orbit. A new trade pact was drawn up under which Indo-China’s raw materials were to be exchanged for Japanese manufactures, and certain military privileges granted to Japan. Needless to say, all these negotiations were concluded between Vichy and Tokyo, the Indo-Chinese not figuring anywhere. Thus Indo-China like so many other colonies became just a victim in the web of international manoeuvring. For as the Axis powers gained ground, Japan’s pressure on France and therefore on Indo-China strengthened, at times by diplomatic action, at other times through military pressure, the Rome-Berlin-Tokyo alliance ultimately giving the leadership in Asia to Japan. The Japanese installed themselves in northern Tonkin as a foothold from which to launch further economic, military and territorial expansion, in the shape of outright cession of provinces, additional military and air-bases, installation of puppet governments under Japanese protection for Annam and Cambodia, and last but not the least, credit loans to finance the Japanese military plans.

The rapid deterioration in Japan’s internal food situation coupled with the external politico-economic pressure Japan was being subjected to, was reflected in the rapidity of Japan’s drive to absorb Indo-China’s economy. Japan’s first move was her decision to make
the entire rice supply of the South-Eastern countries which she now controlled, amounting to approximately 85 per cent of the World’s rice exports, her virtual monopoly; the second, her persistent endeavour to obtain freedom to exploit Indo-China’s mineral and raw materials and to utilise her strategic position for war-bases. The air-bases were, of course, used for bombing the Burma Road. Ironically enough, at this stage the decadent French Government by a series of decrees conceded to Indo-China, what she had resisted doing all along, an economic and customs autonomy, but for the unholy purpose of enabling that hapless country to make every and any concession that Japan may demand of her! The Japanese on their part showed their intention of making their occupation of certain strategic parts such as Northern Tonkin, permanent; in pursuance of this Japanese vested interests soon began to arrive to settle in Indo-China. Externally, in addition to Japanese military pressure, the much-harried colony was beset by the revisionist offensive of Thailand claiming territories it had previously held in Laos and Cambodia. This demand ultimately took the form of Military Action which Japan utilised very successfully, by first offering its mediation and later like the monkey in Aesop’s fable holding the scales, exploiting the role to strengthen its own position in the Pacific. The French were thus forced to agree to Japan’s award and concede 25,000 square miles of territory to Thailand.

Internally all the while Indo-China was going through convulsions of its own. On the one hand, the De Gaullist French Section was fostering revolt and resistance against the continued encroachment of Japan. On the other, Vichy under Axis pressure launched a general offensive in Indo-China against the De Gaulle followers and in a shattering shake up, effected the arrest of several important officials, chief among them the Governor of Cochin-China, the Inspector-General, Resident Superior of Laos, Chief of the Financial Administration and the like, all on suspicion of treason. In fact, this suspicion of alleged anti-Japanese activities was made one of the excuses by Japan for demanding her right of landing Japanese troops in Saigon, said to be the centre of these conspiracies.
Nor was the unrest confined to the French elements alone. The general deterioration in the situation had led to a ferment amongst the people of Indo-China too. The crisis engendered by economic dislocation brought on by war, leading to shortage of food and other essentials, were adding to the general smouldering in the country. By November 1941, fresh reports were appearing of rioting by armed Annamites, the most militant of the Indo-Chinese, as a result of which 200 were said to have been lined up and shot. But the tide did not abate by any means. For, this was followed by a series of such serious uprisings that Domei, the Japanese News Agency, reported that the situation was so grave that every day planes left Saigon to bomb centres of trouble. Guerillas operated to stall and obstruct Japanese Military manoeuvres. On December 12, the Vichy Government found it necessary to issue a communiqué on these disturbances and to admit that the help of the Military and Navy had become necessary to suppress them. On December 14, an Indo-Chinese communiqué confessed to having arrested over a thousand people in the Saigon area alone, and that the jails had become so overcrowded that hundreds had to be lodged in ships, pending military trials which presupposes that martial law must have been already in force.

The British army was the first to march, ostensibly to supervise the Japanese surrender, but in reality to hold the fort for the French until the latters’ troops could move in and take over the old control. For the British commander, far from disarming the Japanese, got busy utilising them to overthrow the newly formed Viet Nam Republic. But the Viet Namese were able to resist not only the British assaults but also the French efforts to re-establish themselves. Even in the midst of this conflict, popular elections were held by Viet Nam to form a representative government.

After six months of bitter warfare, France seemed to reconcile herself to an agreement with this, her rebel colony. But she had obviously far from abandoned her ambitions to hold on to Indo-China. Resorting to the age-old imperialist game, France too began
canalising on what she termed her “responsibilities” to the other States of Indo-China, and the Chinese and Indian minorities, by insisting on the French having a hand in the running of the Federal Government. In truth it is only a cover for France to maintain her old economic grip on South-East Asia of which Indo-China forms the base and whose 23 millions form 1/3 of France’s empire. France holds today 97 per cent of the £100,000,000 foreign business investments and the whole of the £1,000,000 rentiers of Indo-China. Up to World War II, France accounted for 53.3 per cent of Indo-China’s imports and 60 per cent of its exports. This was partly affected by maintaining a policy of tariff “assimilation” under which free trade existed between Franco and Indo-China, with the latter levying protective tariff rates on goods from other countries on the same basis as France itself. This offered the French commercial interests the same privileged position in the colony as in their own country.

The French had tied their colonial possessions to France to even a greater extent than the English did theirs, and French Capital controlled Indo-Chinese economy rigidly through its hold over the latter’s raw materials. The French now feel that if they can only separate the rich territory of Cochin-China from the hinterland of Annam and Tonkin, the Viet Nam will sooner or later become dependent on them, and that free state can be reduced to a mockery by economic emasculation. For this purpose, on the one hand, France played for time, delaying an agreement with the Viet Nam in order to bring military reinforcements into Cochin-China; and on the other, through her High Commissioner rallying together Indo-Chinese vested interests such as the big landlords who have become French stooges because they are given to understand that their privileged position is tied up with French imperialism on the basis of their common interest against that of the Viet Nam, very much like the Princes’ block in India. For under the previous feudal regime under the puppet Emperor, virtually all power was in French hands. Viet Nam is making a desperate bid to maintain the free Republic which she has at such a cost established and which the
French Imperialist power is seeking to destroy by military force. For while France recognized the Viet Nam on March 6th as a Free State, it stipulated at the same time that it was to be part of a federation of the five states of Indo-China, each with its own constitution, the federation to be presided over by a Governor-General and Council consisting of Indo-Chinese ministers from all the states, and French representatives to control the federal budget, foreign relations and commercial treaties. The Viet Nam naturally resents this and insists on its rights to control and regulate all Indo-Chinese affairs at home and abroad.

The separatist movement France is organizing in the other States is meant to politically and economically disrupt the Republic of which they form an integral part, even as territorial disruption is being encouraged in India under a sinister caption of “special responsibilities” of the British towards the minorities, tribal peoples and the Indian Princes, etc.
Kamaladevi’s first trip to the U.S., from late 1939 through the fall of 1941, occurred almost accidentally. She was travelling through the Middle East and Europe and planning to place her son in school in London. But the outbreak of war there brought her to the U.S. where the Roosevelt administration helped her to overcome British visa problems in order to stay. Her prior achievements had been covered in U.S. newspapers and so she was already known to U.S. audiences.

Kamaladevi lectured across the country, from Washington D.C. to San Antonio Texas. The difficult task she undertook was to criticize British imperialism even as Hitler was moving across Europe to threaten Britain itself. “In the event of war,” she was quoted in the Washington Post, “the Indians, themselves denied independence, could not be diverted from their own demands and aroused to go thousands of miles away to fight for democracy elsewhere.” This perspective would ultimately become Gandhi’s “Quit India” policy of 1942–1944. Kamaladevi left the country just months before the Pearl Harbor attack. The 1939–1941 U.S. trip is discussed in essays in this volume by Julie Laut, who stresses Kamaladevi’s contacts with women in and around the Roosevelt administration; and by Nico Slate, who emphasizes her links to African American activists.

Kamaladevi’s personal reactions and experiences in the U.S.
are best covered in her autobiography, excerpted in the first set of selection below. She met an enormous range of Americans, from unnamed Black people who welcomed her throughout the segregated South, to influential figures, among them: birth control activist Margaret Sanger, atomic scientist Robert Oppenheimer, Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins, unionist Harry Bridges, pacifist A.J. Muste, singer and activist Paul Robeson, and President and Mrs. Roosevelt.

She was particularly impressed with New Deal programs for democratic forms of economic modernization, especially in rural, underdeveloped areas. A separate piece she published in 1947 on an innovative U.S. government program to bring electrification to the Tennessee Valley evidences this. Several of the themes struck in this article – the necessity of attending to the “human element” in development, the importance of cooperatives – became pronounced in her own work a decade later in India.

She published two other books covering her American experiences. *Uncle Sam’s Empire* was written in 1944 just after Kamaladevi was released from two years in prison for joining with other Indian National Congress leaders to withhold support for the British war effort so long as India was not free. This experience shadows a book which focuses on U.S. imperialism in the Caribbean. Kamaladevi offers an impressive survey of the colonial history of the Americas, beginning with the European empires of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and ending with the growth of U.S. “dollar diplomacy,” a new form of exploitation which was transforming a group of British colonies to its own kind of imperial power.

The second of these books, *America: the Land of Superlatives* (1946), offers a more positive take on the U.S., combining history, travelogue, and personal reminiscence. This view of the U.S. from abroad stands in stark contrast to simplistic accounts written by westerners of their impressions of India, most significantly Katherine Mayo’s 1927 *Mother India*. Kamaladevi’s
book was balanced between appreciation for U.S. democratic culture and its vibrant national “personality,” and sharp criticism of the racism, materialism and class inequality she found there.

The first chapter, here excerpted, surveys American society’s “superlatives,” its size, rapidity, and “tempestuousness,” all taking place in a “dollar” oriented society. It concludes with observations about the intolerance of dissent, soon to explode in the anti-Communist witch hunts of Senator Joseph McCarthy. The selection from the book’s last chapter returns to the theme of whether and how America is poised to assume Great Britain’s imperial legacy. The question for Kamaladevi was what role the U.S. would play in the postwar world and specifically with respect to the former European colonies. She juxtaposed her admiration for the “love of liberty and the democratic urge of the American people” with her fear of the impulse toward world domination of American finance capital. The American people, she concludes, still have a choice as to which path they will take.

In America
[From Inner Recesses Outer Spaces (1985), pp. 234–44.]

When I stepped on the American soil, I did enter a new world, also then still a younger world. There rose the tall skyscrapers challenging the skies, that put me in mind of high structures raised by adventurous children with wooden playing blocks. Pandita Ramabai has recorded that America made one lively for there seemed to be an electric current in the soil. The people seem restless, such an enormous blending of diverse people and cultures could hardly have produced subdued temperaments. In the dim morning light stood the Statue of Liberty holding aloft the torch to guide the wanderer seeking shelter. I wondered how many Americans themselves remember the appeal in the inscription at its base:
Give me your tired, your poor
The huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuge of your teeming shore,
Send these, the tempest-tost to me,
I lit my lamp beside the golden door.

It was found necessary to apply the axe to this at some stage. The worst sufferers in this had been the Indians who were not only debarred from entry while others got quotas but also deprived of citizenship, even though a number of Asians from various countries could enjoy them. Batches long settled were harshly shipped back. This pointed discrimination was obviously the result of British pressure. For many of these Indians were politically astir. Even the Supreme Court of the day had made a ridiculous interpretation of this by stating that to a man in the street Indians would not appear as belonging to the Caucasian-race and only they were permitted entry. This was the main problem in which the Indian community was enmasked.

I was plunged into almost a round-the-clock programmes. I had invitations through some personalities. Others came through bodies like the League of Womens Voters, Civil Liberties Union, League for Peace and Freedom and a whole host of them.

The course the women’s movement had taken in the New World was to me a tremendous surprise.…. The battle for citizenship rights for women is a grand saga starting with Susan B. Anthony casting a vote in 1872 without the Constitutional right and therefore being convicted, ending in the adoption of the Constitutional amendment to grant women citizenship rights in 1918. Though those years the women were subjected to ruthless physical attacks, abuses, prison terms, dubbed as Cannibals.

True I had been aware of the traumatic experiences of Suffragists in England.…. But in the New World which I was now entering women had come a long way. There were for instance special courses for fathers
with diplomas under the title of ‘Prepared Parent’, to enable both the parents to share the domestic and family duties.

I found the country stimulating, and I could learn both from the positive as well as the destructive characteristic. Under the former a formidable social awakening had led to purposeful socio-economic activities to combat relentlessly the volcanic power of the billion dollar firms like giant corporations, combines, sweat shops and the like.

An assuring feature, to me new and gratifying, was the coagulating of social sciences as a permanent lever to direct human affairs and become an integral part of the nation’s daily life. The vague ‘Social Work’ was no more a leisure hour diversion of the rich or haphazard experiments of the amateurs. Social work was directed by experts and executed by trained workers.

The New Deal initiated under President Roosevelt had activised several progressive measures, though not radical, devised out of the broken strands of a crisis more as a temporary bridge to cross a flood. It certainly was proving a break like the first streak of light peeping out of inky blue sky.

The wide all-pervasive activities under Home Science; the Americans prefer the term Home Economics, impressed me, especially the rural extension work which included even construction of houses with modern amenities, remodelling old ones, full instructions on the use of modern appliances that made life less burdensome for the housewife, etc.

As Roosevelt himself answered his critics in typical American phraseology: ‘We may not know where we are going but we are on our way’. The carrying of the benefits of modern science and technology to the rural households to transform the lives of those women bypassed by the rushing mainstream, stirred new hopes in me. I did not realise then they were vain hopes. Over 40 decades have rolled by since, and what we are gasping for here is still drinking water for our village women. Equally encouraging was it to see almost as many boys as girls in Home Economics institutions....
Individuals and organisations were pressing me to prolong my stay and try to pose the Indian question before the public more graphically and purposefully in the war context. Was it really worth it, was the big question posed before me. Suddenly it seemed to get solved by itself by a strange quirk of fate. An invitation arrived from Mrs. Roosevelt to meet her and her husband over a tea. The Roosevelts were championed by those I became friendly with loosely known as liberals. They functioned with unusual informality. Of course the New Deal was a real asset to strengthen this phase. Mrs. Eleanor Roosevelt to them was the magnet that made the wheels go round. ‘The woman in all American history who had played the biggest part in public affairs,’ was their verdict. She obviously indulged in some unconventional doings and carried them in her long and rapid strides. It was whispered in hushed tones that one had to literally run to keep up with her when she walked. Many other tales, like how when she was knocked down by a car in a New York street, people running to help her had to wave their hands in thin air, for she had already tramped off on her errands.…

Against this background, meeting her was to me quite an event. Mr. Roosevelt was for America understandably, still a controversial figure, but for me, vaguely rumoured as sympathetic to India’s freedom. Mrs. Roosevelt was a big-made woman, with rather a gaunt face, a personality breathing solidity, power, with an air of informality, and kindly manners. I was relieved to find we were by ourselves, except for a couple of secretaries, remote in the background.

Her first question was on the shortness of my visit. I explained the circumstance. She looked rather cross. ‘I am not shocked for we do face such discomfiture sometimes. Please do not take this country as inhospitable. Feel free to stay as long as you need or wish to. The visa matter can be easily fixed up. We have a lady minister whom we would like you to meet and if you explain to her your needs, she will have them attended to. We would be most unhappy if you were to pack off as though we turned you out.’

‘Your Immigration Department has probably been alerted to
beware of me. In war time, patriotism is at a high premium. But in a subject country it is treachery’, I commented. I explained how I had originally been point blank denied a visa to the States on the ground that I was an undesirable, likely to cause breach of peace. ‘Just visualise the picture of a totally unknown single woman like me able to set a vast country like this on fire. It is obviously their own guilty conscience that distorts their vision and they see a dagger lurking in the bosom of every self-respecting Indian,’ I concluded.

Roosevelt who until then had been making a few desultory queries now chimed in in his deep sonorous voice. ‘You may be aware that I feel strongly on India’s right to freedom. It is one of the questions on which Churchill and I have clashed. The war in my opinion has accelerated the urgency of its solution.’ He gets impatient over what he feels is our inability to see how vital India is to their successful conduct of the war; and irritated over interfering in their affairs as he calls it. On this, at one point, I had to rather jocularly but appropriately remind him this was natural as at one stage we were in the same position as India now is. In his habitual obstinate note he asked me not to press it lest our serious rift get known and undermine our unity, so essential for our success. I now realised that what was a rumour had reality behind it, as more evidence has since come to light to prove that Roosevelt had nonetheless pursued it by addressing Gandhiji on the eve of Quit India. The letter was suppressed at the Delhi end. Instead the Viceroy directed London to stop American sentimentalists from trying to visit India and leave us to mind our own business. Earlier it was Roosevelt’s as well as Chiang Kai Shek’s pressure to reconcile India and get her cooperation that is said to have resulted in Sir Stafford Cripps Mission to India. This further convinced me that India would have to fight her own battle and singly, unlike America, to win her own freedom.…

Over a period [Mrs. Roosevelt and I] kept meeting and each contact was enlivened afresh, and threw light on her. I saw that the afflicted human beings moved her to instant aid. Once when she heard of the woes of the miners’ families in West
Virginia, she drove herself down, sitting incognito at the wheel. As she moved round the hovels, she chatted with the miners’ wives who had no clue to her identity. Instant relief to the needy followed, while long term rehabilitation was set afoot for the community.

When I referred to this episode she remarked: ‘A country is a collection of human beings. It is this element we have to touch if we desire to serve the country, for it is the most important.’

I once asked her how rewarding were her activities with the youth. ‘I try to make them feel they are necessary, to stimulate them into involvement with community activities or they will be lost to the country.’ Thus under the New Deal was the National Youth Administration got humming with a wide variety of opportunities for the young to use their talents.

As the war went apace, she grew visibly concerned for the future. ‘We must make a better world when this ends, unlike in 1918, or…’ and she would throw up her hands. That is why, she explained, she was most keen to see that no encroachments were made on the socio-economic facets of the New Deal.

As I received an invitation to the Presidential inauguration in Washington I attended it. Being mid-January it was a bitter cold day, but keen to see it, I braved the weather, for the Oath-taking ceremony is public. The President delivered his inaugural address starting by underscoring the themes that dominated his previous period, then going on largely to stress the need for strengthening the Nation’s defence capabilities in the grim realities of a global war….

My visa was extended. Now many doors seemed to open out to enable me to travel and see whatever I wished to….

Unions were not only strong, with added power under the New Deal, but equally prosperous. Heads of Unions drew what to me seemed fabulous salaries, not to speak of the other substantial perks they enjoyed, all of which was to me worlds remote from our straggling pitiful workers’ unions. I could see how officering unions could become attractive, lucrative careers for the ambitious; as any other business or trade. I kept hearing the popular saying: ‘Unions are big business!’
An intriguing experience was a visit to the famous Sing Sing Prison. Warden Lewis Lawes himself met and escorted me round. He had by now attained a great reputation as a rare jail official who had tried to humanise the grim prison life. There was an air of benign refinement about him. I wanted to visit the women’s section first. He asked me to take my own time and chat freely with as many inmates as I wished to. I first looked round the cells. Each had newspaper clippings obviously with her own picture prominently pasted over her bed. They were loud and highly coloured descriptions of the accused, the crime, the trial, playing up the interview, given on the crime by her, all of which rather shook me up. As I introduced myself as an ‘Old Timer’, they crowded round me, chummy, free and frank. I asked them about the ‘Pin ups’. They narrated their stories with a sense of pride and satisfaction that thoroughly disturbed me.…

Warden Lewis led me to his office, placed refreshments and a cup of steaming coffee before me. ‘I am sure you need it after that visit,’ he said with a smile. ‘It was rather an unsettling experience. I was totally unprepared for it,’ I admitted. He then asked me about Indian prison life. ‘By the way it may amuse you to know that in the official communication I received on your visit, you were described as a ‘distinguished prisoner from India’, so I presumed you had seen the inside of a jail’. I explained I had a few bouts of imprisonment for political activities, I described briefly the Indian political struggle for freedom. ‘I salute you Madam, privileged to be an associate of that great man Gandhi. He inspires all of us.’ …

An exhilarating (sic) trip was to the Southwest. At Phoenix, Arizona, I spent a few days with Margaret Sanger, then called the Mother of Family Planning. Magnificently handsome, always with a radiant smile, soft spoken, gentle, she looked anything but a battle scarred soldier. Nevertheless hers had been a relentless fight against the blind laws of bigotted conservatism, and she had even courted imprisonment for the right of the mother to decide on the size of her family. Sunk in a luxurious padded chair in the fabulous Sanger mansion on the edge of a desert, I listened to Margaret’s hair raising
tales of her fierce battles. Even sending literature by mail was illegal, leave alone vocally advocating birth control. Looking regal on a high-backed chair, her exploits to frustrate the ignominy of the law, sounded incongruous, like bad fairytales. I told her of my learning birth control clinical work in one of her clinics in New York under her deputy, Florence. It was almost a decade later that Margaret and Florence both came out to India and the Family Planning Association of India was inaugurated, the first nationwide effort to launch this crucial movement in which Dhanwanti Ramarao took the major lead.

I moved West into New Mexico to visit the Amer-Indians. For here they lived in their old style in their honeycomb terraced community dwellings, rising up to a kind of a pyramid, made of adobe, brick-clay mixed with straw and water moulded in rectangular forms and sun-dried. With some changes that machines had wrought, life still looked like that of their ancient ancestors. They looked so pronouncedly Asian, that the theory they had shifted continents, crossing the Behring Straits seemed more than credible. Their tribal pattern was not much different from that of our tribals. Their arts like dance, crafts also bore strong similarities. They too had been through the same kind of traumatic experience as ours, of being dispossessed, isolated, but a new era had dawned for them now, with the advent of the New Deal. Amongst the thinking section I had been coming across individuals who proudly claimed a tribal heritage. I was also told that when the Constitution of a free America was being framed, the raw men of today sought counsel of these wise men of yesterday, realising they had much to give and to teach.

[pp. 250-56] One day a most unexpected thing happened as I kept meeting people. Someone brought me an informal invitation from Robert Oppenheimer, a noted physicist, rather a hero at the moment, for having ‘split the atom,’ considered a most remarkable feat. Rather bewildered I sought the genesis of this. The scientist was greatly interested in Indian philosophy, culture, had even tried
to learn Sanskrit; he was also curious to meet someone active in the Indian freedom struggle.

Oppenheimer’s physical personality was a surprise. Very lean and extraordinarily young, for his achievement, he was just approaching forty. The most striking were his eyes, kind of piercing grey blue in contrast to the sickly pallor of his face. He proved easy and friendly to chat with. I was curious to know what led him to delve into Indian philosophy. ‘There is much ancient wisdom in it and I was specially keen to unravel the relationship between science and the future of man,’ he explained. ‘Have you unraveled it?’ I asked. ‘I think I have only a glimmer of the answer.’ …

[I said] ‘The Orient is not mysterious or airy-fairy as the West assumes. Deep study as also strong intuition must have guided the knowledge seekers for they did not possess your sophisticated laboratories. To grasp the ultimate knowledge they touched life at various points to gain the wide range of experiences, acutely aware of the complexity of the universe that you are now discovering.’

Oppenheimer responded in a serious tone: ‘Though I cannot pretend to know all the wisdom of the East, I entertain feelings of respect for the vast dimensions of its knowledge.’

‘I would like to go back to the problem of the role of the scientist in society which you say led you to the Indian studies. Can you define it?’ I asked.

After a brief silence he began; ‘It is not only a knotty but bewildering proposition. Because for me scientific discoveries with their new knowledge are hardly communicable, a widening chasm divides the two.’ ‘Then does it mean the scientist can play no vital role in society’, I asked. His answer was: ‘Like the artist, both live in a world of their own like on a tricky edge of what to the average man is a mysterious world. What the scientist, even as the artist, strives to do, is build contact points, bridges so to say, for a meeting of the new with the familiar.’ ‘What next’, I asked. After a thoughtful silence he said: ‘Why, hit on some new ideas – try to accomplish something exceptional.’ I did not realise at that stage and I wonder if he did,
what this ‘exceptional’ was to be though he had already assiduously laid the ground work for it. To me his answers sounded vague, like indulging in diffuse generalities. It left me with a sense of emptiness. Was he devoid of conviction or commitment? How much of the Indian philosophy had he assimilated?

The answer came four years later. The scene was in a desert, Alamagordo in New Mexico in mid-July 1945. The first atom bomb – the first nuclear explosion took place and a weird thing happened simultaneously. When the explosion lit up the sky with an unnatural light, two lines from the Bhagvata Gita flashed through Oppenheimer’s mind, so he says, as he clung to one of the uprights in the control room:

“If the radiance of a thousand suns were to burst into the sky
That would be like the splendour of the Mighty one’.

Then as the sinister and devastating cloud of destruction filled the scene around, Krishna’s sonorous voice sounded reassurance to Oppenheimer:

‘I am become death
the Shatterer of Worlds.’

To him the atom bomb was the god incarnate himself! 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?

What was the driving motive behind pursuing the use of this bomb at this stage? Today many of the once secrets, are laid bare for history to record the truth.

Hitler was dead, Germany was occupied. Japanese military representatives had put out feelers for terms of surrender even as early as April in Switzerland, followed in July by the Mikado himself, through his Ambassador in Moscow trying to initiate negotiations for cessation of hostilities, giving plenary powers to the Prince for
this purpose. As the U.S. was determined to go through with the bombing, this initiative got no response. There were besides repeated appeals by top scientists numbering sixty-seven, to stop it, which were peremptorily ignored. America it is said, wanted to go it alone, before Russia came in to share the spoils in the East; as also believing or rather hoping that Russia’s ambitions would be deterred by this. How vain this hope was, was proved by Russia devising a thermonuclear bomb impregnated with a power 2500 times greater, in October 1961! The pettiness of the human mind in its blind passion to devastate, has not changed since the jungle warfare of the primitives.…

As I made plans for my return journey I decided to go through what is called the American deep South where discrimination based on colour was still almost like an article of faith. So I fixed up the tour so that I would only stay with the coloured, share their life and experiences.

In New York and the Northern region though the colour consciousness was there, it was not crudely brought into one’s consciousness, except by gentle hints, like in certain households the blacks were not welcome, so I met them elsewhere.

But in the South it was a different story. It was blatant and crude. It was soon after the train started moving through Louisiana that the ticket checking man addressed me very peremptorily; ‘You have to move out from here to the reserved section’. I asked him politely why. ‘That is the rule and you better obey it or you will regret it.’ I explained this seat had been given to me when I got the ticket and I did not have any intention of ‘moving from here’, and I went back to my book. I heard him give a snort and angrily stride away. He returned a little later in rather a subdued air. Where do you come from was the next question. ‘New York,’ I said. ‘I mean which land do you hail from.’ ‘It makes no difference’, I answered. ‘I am a coloured woman obviously and it is unnecessary for you to further disturb me for I have no intention of moving from here.’ ‘You are an Asian’ he muttered and went off.
At Charleston I stayed with a delightful couple, highly cultured, well informed. I felt a pang at parting. When we reached the railway station, they escorted me to a point, then stopped, pointed out my train then bade farewell. Seeing my discomfiture, the lady said gently, ‘It is best you are not seen in our company when you board the train.’ Before I could protest they swiftly vanished in the moving crowd. My long happy stay in this land was beginning to go sour.

In San Francisco where I was to take a ship, I stayed with one of the old Indian families and learnt for the first time some hidden chapters in the known travails of the Indian community, during World War I when it was campaigning for support of the Indian cause and to expose that an empire built on exploitation can’t fight for democracy.

The British government in India notified that these agitators would not be permitted to return back home. Thereupon some of the long time Indians applied for American citizenship. This resulted in a tragiomic incident which defies intelligent reasoning: The Supreme Court when called upon to decide if citizenship could be given to these applicants, gave the following bizarre opinion: though an Indian may belong to the Caucasian Race, the man in the street in this country would never take him for a white man, therefore he cannot be given American citizenship....

Amongst my several bewildering experiences was a most unexpected one an encounter with ‘Black Power.’ I had close associations with the Negro Communities in various walks of life and I kept hearing repeatedly of ‘Black Power’....

I was aware of the deep anguish of the Negro community over its continued rejection by the White compatriots. After decades of futile struggles it had come to the conclusion that its identity within this country as people could be satisfactorily affirmed only through an assertion of its own original roots as black people with a genuine pride, and to believe that in this role it had a special contribution to make rather than go on attempting to get absorbed in a multi-racial community. Thus a current to help Negro culture to flower had been ignited. The formulation of and stress on Negro culture as a distinct
entity was the main element. This had thrown up several what were termed as Prophets, Saviours, Messengers, etc. One Father Divine had struck the keynote when he declared with fervour: ‘I am a Negro and God dwells in me. Every Negro is like unto me, we are therefore superior to the ‘White’.

Early in this century an American, Noble Drew, was inspired by the Islamic faith which rejected racial differences and accepted all who embraced Islam as brothers. Drew’s successor proclaimed himself as Elijah Muhmad Ali, and established the Temple and the University of Islam for training Muslim youth. The Muslim Negroes now came to be known as Nation of Islam and gained a sense of pride in their own heritage.

Apart from the sense of identity, this worked in infusing self confidence and fostering incentives for self improvement as also proved an added inducement to join the Nation of Islam. In this significant mission this Nation sought the aid of the Indian Muslims, who to these Negroes seemed ideally suited for the task. Thus some Muslim Indian leaders had been recruited to carry the new message into the Negro fold and regenerate this long depressed community. As I got to see more of them, I saw one obvious result of this new impact in the flowing garbs the Negroes had begun to proudly sport. It was strange how India seemed totally unaware of this delicate mission some Indians were being called upon to shoulder!…

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**The Caribbean – America’s Sea of Destiny**

[From Uncle Sam’s Empire (1944).]

“Mare Nostrum ” – How many had made the boast through the age and their blood had been drained into the sea, and their dust blown over the hills, and the very names of their tribes were lost to history.”

— Upton Sinclair
Becoming a Coloured Woman
Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and the African American Freedom Struggle

NICO S L A T E

In the spring of 1941, in the midst of the Second World War, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay sat down in the ‘whites only’ section of a segregated train travelling through the American South. Just across the Louisiana border, the ticket collector ordered her to move. She asked him why, and the man said simply, ‘That is the rule and you better obey it or you will regret it.’ She did not move. He walked away angrily, but soon returned – subdued, it seemed, by something he had learned. He asked her where she was from, making clear he realized she was not African American. ‘New York,’ she replied, evasively. ‘I mean which land do you hail from,’ he clarified. At this point, she could have proudly explained that she was a distinguished visitor from India, a colleague of Mahatma Gandhi, and a champion of Indian independence and the rights of Indian women. She could have listed her many distinguished American friends or told the belligerent ticket collector about her recent visit to the White House as the guest of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. Instead, when prompted to tell the man ‘from which land she came’, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay replied, ‘It makes no difference. I am a coloured woman obviously and it is unnecessary for you to disturb
me for I have no intention of moving from here.’ The ticket collector muttered, ‘You are an Asian’, but he did not bother her again.1

By refusing to move, Kamaladevi defied the legalized bigotry of the American South. By proclaiming herself ‘coloured’, she expressed her solidarity with the millions of African Americans for whom the brutalities of segregation were a part of daily life. This was more than a fleeting gesture of sympathy. Throughout her eighteen months in the United States and afterward, Kamaladevi reached out to African Americans, even as she strove to increase American support for Indian independence. In her writings, she envisioned the efforts of African Americans and Indians as related parts of a global struggle against racism and imperialism. In her actions – choosing to spend the night with an African-American family, for example, or keeping her seat in that Louisiana train – she embodied the transnational integrity of her vision.

Kamaladevi was not the first Indian to express solidarity with African Americans. Rather, she helped bring to fruition over fifty years of relationships between Indians and ‘Negro Americans’.2 By revealing a crucial moment in the long history of connections between Indians and African Americans, an examination of Kamaladevi’s time in the United States contributes to the transnational history of South Asia as it moves increasingly beyond the metropole/colony nexus, and toward a fuller recognition of the many historical interconnections between South Asia and other non-European regions of the world.3 In particular, Kamaladevi’s time in the United States demonstrates the centrality of women and women’s struggles to the history of Afro-Indian encounters and the transnational history of South Asia more generally.

Kamaladevi advocated a coloured cosmopolitanism through which she framed commonalities of struggle between those who had opposed racism worldwide. Pratap Bhanu Mehta has located cosmopolitanism between ‘the logic of assimilation that eroded difference’ and ‘an enclavism that made dialogue impossible’. David Hollinger has similarly positioned cosmopolitanism
becoming a coloured woman

between a universalism that would eliminate difference in pursuit of commonality, and a pluralism that would essentialize difference in defense against commonality. Kamaladevi embodied the middle ground that Mehta and Hollinger understand as central to cosmopolitanism. She articulated an inclusive humanism that defied narrow, chauvinist definitions of race, religion, or nation, while simultaneously defending the right of ‘coloured’ people to seek unity on the basis of shared struggles against racism. She advocated unity within the ‘coloured world’ while recognizing the inequalities internal to that world – inequalities Kamaladevi experienced most personally as a woman. Kamaladevi knew that being a ‘coloured woman’ meant confronting not only racism and imperialism but sexism as well.

Kamaladevi reached out to African Americans, not only as an advocate of Indian independence, but as a ‘coloured woman’ who had dedicated her life to opposing not only imperialism and racism, but gender-based oppression as well. For Kamaladevi, being a woman, being Indian, and being ‘coloured’ were equally vital identifications. She recognized the intersectionality of multiple oppressions, and thus sought to forge alliances across social movements and national borders. In India, Kamaladevi located her dedication to the women’s movement within a broader commitment to achieving a more egalitarian society. Within the Hindustan Seva Dal, the Congress Volunteer Corps, or the Congress Socialists, Kamaladevi repeatedly connected her commitment to Indian freedom with what she understood as equally important – the freedom of Indians from all forms of oppression. In Ahmedabad in December 1929, for example, Kamaladevi spoke to a session of the Youth Congress about purna swaraj. She later remembered, ‘In my speech I widened the concept of freedom to also cover many social evils in our society, particularly the oppression of certain sections socially and economically as also the low status given to women.’ Toward the end of her life, Kamaladevi reflected on the tendency of male leaders ‘to treat social evils as different malfunctioning constituents of society.’ She wrote, ‘Even as they failed to see a human personality as an integrated whole, they
failed equally to realise that human life too is an integrated single unit.’ By defining herself as a ‘coloured woman’, Kamaladevi expressed her own ‘integrated’ nature, while positioning herself in opposition to the intersection of racism and gender-based oppression.5

Kamaladevi’s understanding of society as ‘an integrated single unit’, inspired her to combat a range of injustices. In the United States, in addition to reaching out to African Americans and women, she met with labour leaders, youth advocates, and a variety of other social reformers. Importantly, at a time when religious identification had become increasingly divisive at home, Kamaladevi’s coloured cosmopolitanism embraced religious diversity as well. She established networks with Christian pacifists, many of whom opposed British imperialism while adapting Gandhian non-violence to the struggle for racial equality in the United States. She also interacted with Black Muslims, many of whom had forged their own religious links to South Asia, links that Kamaladevi’s writings help to reveal. While striving to garner American support for Indian independence, Kamaladevi positioned *swaraj* within a global struggle against racism, imperialism, economic inequality, and gender-based oppression. She employed transnational connections between India and the United States as a prism, refracting a narrow focus on British colonialism into a broader concern for the diverse struggles of a variety of oppressed groups throughout the world.

‘A DARING AND UNUSUAL PROCEDURE’

When the armies of Adolph Hitler invaded Poland in September 1939, Kamaladevi had just returned to London after walking out of the International Women’s Conference in Copenhagen. She had left the conference in frustration over its silence on the issue of imperialism.6 Letters from Yusuf Meherally, a leading figure in the Congress Socialist Party, preceded Kamaladevi to London. Among those Meherally wrote regarding Kamaladevi’s arrival was George Padmore, a socialist born in Trinidad, then working at the British
Centre Against Imperialism. A renowned Pan-Africanist, Padmore helped keep the definition of ‘Pan-African’ inclusive of Indians and other colonized peoples. During the war, he would serve as foreign correspondent for the Chicago Defender, a leading African-American newspaper that played an important role in bringing news from India to African Americans. Thus, even before she arrived in London, Kamaladevi’s travels reinforced a transnational anti-imperial network linking Indians to other ‘coloured people’ worldwide.

Yusuf Meherally also alerted V.K. Krishna Menon that Kamaladevi was coming to London. Menon, who later led India’s delegation at the United Nations and served as the Indian Defense Minister, was a leading figure in the Indian community in Britain. Secretary of the India League, an editor at Penguin books, and a member of the Labour Party, Menon’s connections extended across much of the British Left. He organized a welcoming reception for Kamaladevi in London, inviting over a hundred distinguished guests. As Europe descended into war, however, Menon suggested that Kamaladevi’s time might be better spent on the other side of the Atlantic. He proposed that Kamaladevi raise American awareness of British imperialism and thus ‘strike a few blows for India’. To facilitate Kamaladevi’s mission, Menon asked a filmmaker, K.S. Hirlekar, to discuss Kamaladevi’s travel plans with Indians living in the United States. Hirlekar found Ramlal Bajpai, an Indian expatriate and veteran anti-imperialist, supportive. Kamaladevi herself corresponded with Basant Kumar Roy of New York, who also helped to arrange her travel plans. Throughout her time in the United States, Kamaladevi would rely often on the Indian-American community, revealing the importance of the many links between the Indian Diaspora and domestic Indian nationalism.

Kamaladevi’s travel plans did not escape the attention of British officials. A letter from the Royal Empire Society to Lord Zetland, the Secretary of State for India, complained that Kamaladevi’s politics were ‘distinctly anti-British’. The letter, now in the British Library, contains a revealing note scribbled across its top: ‘Can we take any action to prevent this woman going to the U.S.A.?’. The answer came
in a letter from one intelligence operative to another, explaining that although Kamaladevi was a ‘keen Socialist and an ardent champion of the Women’s Movement,’ she was not ‘sufficiently fanatical to be classed as “Left-Wing”’. Furthermore, the letter continued, ‘She has powerful friends in the United Kingdom who would, no doubt, object if she were refused permission to go to the United States.’ Thus, after careful review, Kamaladevi was granted the right to visit the United States. Secretly, British authorities kept track of her visit, producing in the process valuable records for the historian.10

Kamaladevi’s imperial spies must not have been happy with the warm welcome she received from influential Americans. Kamaladevi met with Supreme Court Justices Hugo Black and Felix Frankfurter, as well as several members of Congress. She spoke on the radio in New York City and delivered the convocation address at Kansas University. She discussed science with the nuclear physicist, Robert Oppenheimer, and art with museum curator Ananda Coomaraswamy. She attended the Presidential inauguration of Franklin Roosevelt as well as a convention of Roosevelt’s rivals, the Republican party.11

In her private meetings and her public speeches, Kamaladevi repeatedly emphasized the injustice of British imperialism and the need for Americans to support Indian independence. One of her speeches was succinctly summarized in the headline of the next day’s New York Times: ‘Britain is Assailed for Plight of India.’ Kamaladevi’s message found a receptive audience among many Americans. A Professor of Sociology at Hobart College in Geneva, New York, wrote to Jawaharlal Nehru after hearing Kamaladevi speak before a large audience. ‘She lectured in the Coxe Hall auditorium to a capacity house,’ the Professor wrote, ‘and when she finished there was the most prolonged cheering I ever heard there.’ He concluded, ‘This wonderful woman inspired us with the spirit of the Indian movement for independence and we shall do our best to carry its meaning to others.’ Nehru himself wrote to Kamaladevi in September, 1940 to say that he had been ‘following with great interest’ her ‘extraordinarily interesting time in America’.12
Kamaladevi’s efforts on behalf of Indian independence did not prevent her from championing women’s rights. Many of Kamaladevi’s speeches addressed the struggles of Indian women. She went out of her way to meet a diversity of American women, touring the women’s section of Sing Sing Prison and travelling to Arizona to talk with the famed birth-control advocate, Margaret Sanger. After sharing tea with Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, the First Lady gave her a tour of the White House. On November 26, 1939, an article in *The New York Times* quoted Kamaladevi praising the achievements of Indian women. The article also noted Kamaladevi’s interest in American women’s organizations such as the League of Women Voters. This interest was reciprocated. The League of Women Voters helped arrange many of Kamaladevi’s speaking engagements, often in conjunction with local women’s organizations.\(^{13}\)

Kamaladevi’s efforts to influence American opinion of India and her emphasis on questions of gender did not deter her from publicly demonstrating sympathy with the struggles of African Americans. She later remembered, ‘In New York and the Northern region though the colour consciousness was there, it was not crudely brought into one’s consciousness, except by gentle hints, like in certain households the blacks were not welcome, so I met them elsewhere.’ In the American South, however, racism was ‘blatant and crude’. Kamaladevi chose to travel through the South, and made a point of staying only with African-American families. Her sympathetic interest in the struggles of ‘coloured’ Americans drew attention from both African-American and Indian newspapers. *The Chicago Defender* kept its hundreds of thousands of African-American readers apprised of Kamaladevi’s efforts, calling her ‘Gandhi’s Aide’ and ‘India’s foremost woman leader’. The *New York Amsterdam News*, an African-American newspaper based in Harlem, announced Kamaladevi’s ‘farewell talk’ before she left to visit the South. The *Bombay Chronicle* told its readers of Kamaladevi’s decision to stay with African Americans in the South, ‘a daring and unusual procedure because of the strong prejudices against Negroes in that part of the country.’ The paper
concluded, ‘Coming close to the Negro groups, she has considerably endeared India to these struggling people.’

Kamaladevi’s public solidarity with the struggles of African Americans was indeed ‘daring’. When she refused to leave her seat on a segregated train in Louisiana, she risked more than her own immediate safety. Her actions could have alienated Americans receptive to the idea of an independent India but defensive when pressed about injustices closer to home. Kamaladevi’s African-American friends understood the risks involved in her public demonstrations of coloured solidarity. One African-American couple with whom she stayed in Charleston, South Carolina, chose not to accompany her all the way to the railway platform, out of concern that she might be associated with ‘negroes’ and thus face discrimination or violence. At a time when lynchings and race riots were all too common, Kamaladevi’s solidarity with African Americans demonstrated the courage of her coloured cosmopolitanism.

**Race and the India Lobby**

Though ‘daring and unusual’, the solidarities that Kamaladevi forged with African Americans were not unique. Indeed, throughout her time in the United States, Kamaladevi built upon a long history of interconnections between Indian and African-American freedom struggles. She herself had interacted with internationally minded African-American activists as early as 1929, when she attended the Frankfurt session of the League Against Imperialism. Throughout her time in the United States, Kamaladevi gained crucial support from Indian Americans, liberal whites, and African Americans who had for many years fought for Indian independence and against American racism, while seeing both struggles as interconnected. By uniting a diverse assortment of activists in opposition to the hypocrisy of British war aims, the war strengthened what had by 1939 already become a powerful lobby for Indian independence and domestic civil rights. Kamaladevi benefited from this anti-racist,
anti-imperialist lobby, while strengthening it through her speeches and writings.

Among Kamaladevi’s strongest supporters were Christian Americans for whom opposing war, imperialism, and racism were religious commitments. Kamaladevi’s interactions with the Christian pro-India lobby demonstrate the role that progressive Christians played in connecting Indian struggles – and especially Gandhian nonviolence – with the struggle against racial oppression in the United States. On December 17, 1939, Kamaladevi spoke to the Community Church in New York City. Kamaladevi was introduced by John Haynes Holmes, who almost twenty years before had famously called a relatively unknown Mohandas Gandhi the ‘greatest man alive in the world today.’ Holmes, who had helped found the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and had served on its board, exemplified the vitality of an older liberal Christian commitment to combating racial prejudice in the United States and abroad. On January 3, Kamaladevi had dinner with the War Resister’s League, whose president, A.J. Muste, was in attendance. Like John Haynes Holmes, Muste felt a Christian commitment to fight against imperialism and racialism at home and overseas. In the next two decades, he would contribute as much as anyone else to bringing Gandhian non-violence to the African-American struggle.17

In addition to Christian Americans such as Holmes and Muste, Kamaladevi also relied heavily on the support of Indian Americans. On November 21, 1939, soon after she arrived in the United States, Kamaladevi was the guest of honour at a formal dinner attended by leading Indian Americans, including J.J. Singh and Krishnalal Shridharani. Singh and Shridharani both worked to gain citizenship for Indian Americans and independence for India, while learning from and contributing to the struggles of African Americans. In August of 1944, Singh held a party for Walter White, the dynamic Executive Director of the NAACP. Afterward, Singh wrote Vijayalakshmi Pandit praising White as ‘one of the outstanding
negro leaders in this country’ and ‘a perfectly delightful man’. Over the years, Singh and White became friends, as they worked together to defend the rights of Indian Americans and African Americans, and to support the political independence and economic development of India. Kamaladevi met with Walter White at a special gathering of the Harlem branch of the NAACP in December 1939. Beneath a photo of Kamaladevi and White, a newspaper covering the event quoted Kamaladevi offering a classic statement of colored solidarity: ‘We condemn imperialism and oppression in South Africa and in any other part of the world; because of our color we feel a racial kinship with the other colored peoples.’

Kamaladevi’s coloured cosmopolitanism accommodated religious diversity. In addition to embracing Christian pacifists, Kamaladevi reached out to African American Muslims as well. In late 1939, Kamaladevi was surprised to find an old acquaintance from Bombay living in New York City. The friend was none other than Atiya Begam, in Kamaladevi’s words, ‘a well-known hostess’ who ‘ran a salon with her sister, Begam of Janjira, and her well-known artist-art critic husband.’ Atiya Begam was travelling with her husband and several other Indian Muslims. Kamaladevi explained, ‘They had come with a serious mission; to spread and strengthen the message of Islam in the Negro communities who, according to them, were thirsty for it, to be inspired and revived from their abject condition and to be filled with a new life and hope.’ Kamaladevi’s assessment of the religious mission of these Indian Muslims largely validated the positive outlook of the missionaries themselves. At first, Kamaladevi was surprised to learn of the prevalence of Islam among African Americans. She was skeptical that a community of Americans would find real meaning in a religion that seemed so foreign to the United States. But in the end, she concluded, in her words, that ‘to see was to believe’.

Kamaladevi accompanied Atiya Begam to several gatherings of African American Muslims. Kamaladevi noted the ‘flowing robes’ that the African American women wore in the fashion of ‘their Indian
sisters’. Her interactions with Black American Muslims, she believed, allowed her an insight into ‘the hearts of the Negro people which I had not known before in spite of my close associations with them and enjoying the friendship of many.’ In an article she wrote for *The Bharat Jyoti* in March 1970, Kamaladevi linked the growth of Islam with the need for an independent Black identity. She wrote, ‘The women in particular felt they acquired a sense of self-respect and dignity when they joined this group.’ While Kamaladevi criticized the ‘messianic’ nature of the Nation of Islam and its reliance on ‘queer’ theories and anti-white rhetoric, she ultimately defended the religious practice of the people she met as expressing ‘the need for identity and the desire for self-improvement.’

While she reached out to Christian Americans and African American Muslims, Kamaladevi also established strong links with Black socialists. In March 1941, Kamaladevi, herself a member of the Congress Socialist Party, spoke at a meeting of the Council of African Affairs alongside Paul Robeson and Max Yergan. Robeson and Yergan, both left-leaning activists with strong ties to the Soviet Union, had already developed connections to India. Yergan had travelled to India in 1928, where he met a young Jawaharlal Nehru. Robeson and his wife, Eslanda Goode ‘Essie’ Robeson, had also formed strong links to India, in part through their friendship with Nehru and his sister, Vijayalakshmi Pandit.

Kamaladevi’s travels reinforced growing connections between a diversity of activists – Christian pacifists, Indian Americans, socialists, Pan-Africans – all committed to opposing racism and imperialism throughout the world. It would be wrong, however, to portray this network as seamless. Beyond ideological divisions, personal tensions often complicated efforts to achieve a common purpose. J.J. Singh later told Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit that he and Kamaladevi had clashed during her visit. He explained, ‘I happened to have criticized her on one occasion, rather bluntly for what I considered lack of social graces on her part.’ Kamaladevi’s travels overlapped with Bhicoo Batliwala, a lawyer. On January 26, then
known as Indian Independence Day, Roger Baldwin attended a gathering with Kamaladevi and Bhattacharya. A few days later, he wrote Nehru, ‘Miss B. made an excellent speech, but Mrs. K. would not talk. The lady appeared to nurse some not too worthy sentiments of jealousy. She is a bit difficult, and our friend Miss B. was slightly distressed over it.’ He praised Kamaladevi as ‘a most effective spokesman for India’ but added that, compared to Batliwala, she had done relatively little speaking. These criticisms indicate strains that should be expected within such a heterogeneous mixture of people and organizational interests. One of Kamaladevi’s strengths was her ability to articulate a cosmopolitan vision that bridged a variety of struggles. She demonstrated her inclusive vision in the continued support she offered African Americans in the writings she published after she returned to India.22

Crafting a Coloured Cosmopolitanism

Upon returning to India from her travels abroad, Kamaladevi was put in solitary confinement in Vellore Jail. This was not the first time she had been imprisoned for her opposition to British imperialism, but it would be the last. Kumar Goshal, an Indian writer living in the United States, published a newspaper editorial in which he cited Kamaladevi’s imprisonment as an example of the hypocrisy of the United States and Great Britain, two democracies fighting for ‘democracy’ while denying democratic rights to African Americans and Indians. It was not a coincidence that Goshal published his article in an African-American newspaper, *The Pittsburgh Courier*. The African-American press had consistently supported India’s cause, publishing a torrent of articles on India in the wake of the Quit India movement. Coverage of India in the Black press reflected a strong interest in India among the general Black American public. On October 19, 1942 the *Courier* published the results of a poll in which 87.8 per cent of ten thousand black respondents had answered yes to the question, ‘Do you believe that India should
content for her rights and her liberty now?’ As Kamaladevi’s trip to the United States makes evident, African American support for Indian independence was reciprocated by a variety of Indians. After she had returned to India, Kamaladevi herself continued to criticize American racism and to praise the initiative of African Americans. Her writings in India demonstrate the fullest articulation of her coloured cosmopolitanism.23

In 1944, Kamaladevi published *Uncle Sam’s Empire* with Padma Publications, a left-leaning publishing house directed by Kamaladevi’s old friend and fellow Congress Socialist, Yusuf Meherally.24 Kamaladevi’s book sampled American history with an eye to its increasingly imperial role in the world. She dedicated a chapter to ‘The Negro Slave Trade,’ in which she stated, ‘Human history is stained with many a dark patch but few can compare with the blot left by the trade in “Black Ivory” as the negro slaves were termed.’ She told her readers, ‘Off and on the world hears of the negro problem, feigns surprise or indignation, then lapses back into its habitual apathy.’ By consistently reminding Indian audiences of the need to forge solidarities with Africans, African Americans, and other oppressed ‘coloured’ peoples, Kamaladevi helped highlight and combat ‘the negro problem’.25

In 1946, with the war over and Indian independence imminent, Kamaladevi published another book in Bombay. Entitled *America: The Land of Superlatives*, this book demonstrated the extent to which Kamaladevi understood American racism in global terms. Kamaladevi’s analysis of the ‘Negro Problem’ earned its own chapter. She began that chapter by proclaiming, ‘The biggest blot on the fair name of America is the problem of the Negro.’ Importantly, Kamaladevi located African American struggles not only within the context of American democracy, but within the context of a global ‘struggle between the dispossessed colored world and the ruling white.’ In the beginning of her chapter, she noted that the ‘Negro Problem’, ‘has loomed larger than ever in the present setting of the world flux.’ It was not the injustice of American racism, but the
democratic initiative of African Americans that Kamaladevi declared worthy of global attention. She proclaimed, ‘Rarely in history did an enslaved people get so quickly democratic-minded and that is why this emancipation-revolution has a world importance far beyond its local and national character.’ The ‘world importance’ of African American struggles led her to state a truth still relevant today: ‘Suppression and distortion of real Negro History is a crime perpetrated not only on the coloured people but humanity at large.’ Thus, while she wrote her account for the benefit of her fellow Indians, Kamaladevi believed the whole world could learn from the efforts of African Americans.26

One of the key lessons she found in African American history was the intersectionality of multiple oppressions. Kamaladevi warned that ‘if the rights of 13 million citizens may be nullified, either by law, custom or terrorism then surely the same can be done with other unpopular social groups like labour or religious minorities.’ While carefully analysing the history of African American struggles, Kamaladevi consistently linked American racial discrimination to economic inequality. She proclaimed that African Americans had yet to ‘become free in the real economic sense’, and then explained to her readers how the ‘Jim Crow system’ prevented Black Americans from escaping the poverty of share-cropping agricultural labour. She detailed how industrial bosses and landed interests, who Kamaladevi dubbed the ‘rulers of America’, used racial prejudices to attack forward-thinking politicians as ‘nigger lovers’. Her analysis probed the long history of conflict within labour unions over the question of whether membership should be extended ‘irrespective of colour or race’. At the base of contemporary racism Kamaladevi found ‘the inevitable alliance between the new industrial kings and the old land monarchs, against the rising democratic forces of the masses.’ Kamaladevi offered her readers an extended analysis of the economic bases of racial prejudice.27

At times, Kamaladevi’s prose bordered on essentializing African Americans within old stereotypes of the ‘long-suffering Negro’. She
wrote, for example, ‘The negroes in America are a kindly simple folk on whom oppression and suffering have left an indelible mark.’ Kamaladevi’s extended analysis refused, however, to portray ‘kindly simple folk’ as weak victims. Rather, Kamaladevi emphasized repeatedly the past successes and contemporary strivings of a diversity of dynamic African Americans. She proclaimed, ‘Their 60 years’ progress since emancipation has few parallels’, and praised their ‘militancy in the struggle against discrimination’. She lauded African American singers, scientists, authors, and activists, offering a detailed analysis not only of American racism, but of African American initiatives in opposing racism. She made her own views of racial prejudice evident: ‘Of course the old ideas of racial purity, superiority and inferiority have been thoroughly exploded by scientific experts as a result of investigation and tests, but mankind finds it convenient to cling to these erroneous notions for certain ignoble ends.’

Kamaladevi’s analysis of African American culture revealed her understanding of the global significance of African American struggles. She discussed the source of African-American artistic inspiration in terms that could easily fit Indians as well: ‘Oppressed people, even more than others, seek freedom of the mind and spirit, and this urge finds its natural outlet in art forms.’ Kamaladevi explained, ‘The content of Negro art is fixed by the social dynamics of the community, but in a broad national and international setting, not a crude racialism.’ Kamaladevi linked the transnational initiative of African American artists with their ability to assert cultural pride without veering into ‘crude racialism’. Kamaladevi praised African Americans for the same coloured cosmopolitanism she herself demonstrated. As she had in her analysis of African American history, Kamaladevi linked the transnational significance of African American initiatives to the intersectionality of racism with other forms of oppression. Of African American art, she wrote, ‘When it speaks for economic equality and social justice, it speaks for the peoples of the world.’ For an example, she turned to Paul Robeson:
For when Paul Robeson sings he becomes something more than a singer. He transcends all human limitations and becomes the disembodied melody, which knows neither colour nor race. He interprets the ageless, deathless spirit of his lost land of Africa, his priceless heritage, before which even the hooded order of bigotry and hate spontaneously retreat.30

In her praise for Robeson, Kamaladevi demonstrated the dual nature of her coloured cosmopolitanism. She congratulated Robeson for transcending ‘colour’ and ‘race’, immediately before lauding him for interpreting ‘the deathless spirit of his lost land of Africa, his priceless heritage.’ Kamaladevi articulated a coloured cosmopolitanism that accommodated both a universalistic humanism and a strong belief in the importance of social, cultural, and historical roots.

Kamaladevi’s ability to embrace coloured solidarity without resorting to ‘racial chauvinism’ reflected the achievements of the African American artists she praised. To demonstrate the importance of taking pride in being ‘of colour’, Kamaladevi quoted Langston Hughes: ‘The night is beautiful, so the faces of my people.’31 Like Kamaladevi, Langston Hughes defended coloured solidarity without reverting to reverse racialism. Like Kamaladevi, he often placed the links between Indians and African Americans within the context of the struggle for justice worldwide. Hughes utilized an expansive understanding of ‘Jim Crow’ to link the struggle for racial equality at home and worldwide. On October 31, 1942, Hughes published the poem ‘Jim Crow’s Last Stand’ in the Defender. The poem declares:

December 7, 1941,
From Harlem to India to Africa’s land,
Jim Crow started his last stand,
Our battle yet is far from won,
But when it is, Jim Crow’ll be done!32

Like Hughes, Kamaladevi used an expansive notion of ‘Jim Crow’ to link the struggles of Indians and African Americans. She did so
in the most important passage in her book on the United States, a passage that epitomizes the ability of her coloured cosmopolitanism to confront the intersectionality of multiple oppressions. After encouraging her Indian readers to learn from African Americans, Kamaladevi suggested that African Americans would benefit from the liberation struggles of Asians and Africans. She wrote:

Soon Africa too, will come back, and come into her own, and the dark ones will cease to be the ‘untouchables’ of the world. The international colour line has been challenged and stormed by Asia. No more the colonials will allow themselves to be jim-crowed the world over and their country looted under pseudo-slogans. The Negro problem will only cease when the colourline of imperialism vanishes, when Science becomes the benefactor of man and knowledge his friend, and human respect for each other and for the sanctity of life are observed as the codes of our daily life.33

Thus, Kamaladevi placed the struggles of African Americans in a global framework in which ‘colonization’ was akin to ‘Jim Crow’. Importantly, Kamaladevi’s concern with the global interconnection of racism and imperialism did not blind her to India’s own legacy of ‘Jim Crow’. Kamaladevi’s reference to ‘untouchables’ reminded her readers that the Indian struggle for freedom was about more than political independence from Britain. By comparing African American struggles simultaneously to the efforts of Dalits and of all Indians, Kamaladevi demonstrated the power of coloured cosmopolitanism to combat multiple hypocrisies. If the British were fighting for ‘democracy’ while maintaining their empire, were not Indians opposing imperialism while failing to end caste? Thus, Kamaladevi used analogies of struggle between Indians and African Americans like a prism, refracting Indian nationalism into a broader opposition to the intersection of imperialism, racism, and oppressions based on gender, class, and caste. Kamaladevi’s identification as a ‘coloured woman’ revealed a coloured cosmopolitanism that did not preclude
concern for injustices internal to the ‘coloured world’. She attacked what Du Bois had called ‘a color line within a color line, a prejudice within prejudice’.34

Coloured Cosmopolitanism and the Cold War

By sharing her expansive understanding of the ‘coloured world’ with her Indian readers, Kamaladevi contributed to the persistence with which Indians criticized American racism. India’s independence, coupled with the rise of the Cold War, endowed Indian criticism of American racial oppression with new power. Beginning in the late 1940s, Indian opinion helped pressure American presidents, Supreme Court justices, and other top officials, afraid of losing the propaganda battle of the Cold War, to resolve civil rights crises and to instigate significant domestic reforms. Andrew Rotter has explored the connections between Indian criticism of American racism and diplomatic relations between post-independence India and the United States. Mary Dudziak and Thomas Borstlemann have convincingly argued that foreign opinion helped convince American leaders of the need for domestic civil rights reforms. Kamaladevi’s solidarity with African Americans provides a window into the intersection of coloured cosmopolitanism and the cold war. Kamaladevi’s coloured cosmopolitanism reveals that Indian critiques of American racism were not just knee-jerk reactions to Soviet propaganda, but the intellectually robust product of a long and diverse history.35

In 1949, one of the executive editors of African American weekly newspaper, the Pittsburgh Courier, P.L. Prattis, travelled to India for seventeen days. Every day, he wrote an account of his experiences. He then published these accounts in consecutive issues of the Courier. Since the Courier was a weekly, his readers learned about his seventeen-day trip over the course of seventeen weeks. Prattis revealed for his readers the depth and extent of Indian concern for American racism. It was to Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay that Prattis turned to demonstrate Indian support for Black struggles. On his
third day in India, Prattis met Kamaladevi at her home. For his readers, he mentioned Kamaladevi’s travels to the United States and her book, *America: Land of Superlatives*. He described her as a ‘woman of immense power’ and told his readers that they had shared a ‘long, pleasant, fruitful talk’.36 Four days later, Prattis again met up with Kamaladevi. This time, she brought him to the trial of forty-six members of the Socialist Party. Prattis praised her for steadfastly refusing to sit in the courtroom, thus offering his readers a remarkably positive portrayal of an Indian socialist. Discussing her decision to stand, Prattis stated simply, ‘Her friends and followers are on trial, they have been beaten. She will accept no favor from such authorities.’ Over the course of Prattis’s seventeen articles on India, Kamaladevi slowly emerges as the central figure in his time in India.37

Prattis explained his respect for Kamaladevi by sharing with his readers a breathless account of a long conversation he had with her. One night, after dinner, Prattis and Kamaladevi relaxed in her garden. It was a hot summer night, and the two enjoyed sitting outside, beneath the trees, the moon, and the stars. Prattis described the scene carefully, and then told his readers, ‘There, with the faintest of breezes, we talked and talked and talked until it was midnight.’ Prattis heightened his readers’ anticipation by noting that he would think of that conversation for many months to come. ‘We had mused over the color problem all over the world,’ Prattis explained, ‘and I had sought to obtain from her something of her feeling.’ He explained his curiosity, by stating, ‘You can never be sure that these other colored people will feel like we do in the United States.’ Thus, Prattis nonchalantly included Indians as ‘colored’. In fact, throughout his time in India he made reference to the darkness of Indian skin tones, often contrasting that darkness with the cultural predisposition for lightness expressed in matrimonial ads or portrayed in movies with a ‘milk-white cast’.38 Prattis introduced Kamaladevi’s view on ‘the color problem’, by stating, ‘The quiet response of this remarkable woman was something wonderful to which to listen.’ Prattis wanted his readers to read carefully.
Kamaladevi’s response demonstrated her coloured cosmopolitanism. She began by stating, ‘Not as an Indian, but as a human being, my innate self-respect would suffer if I were not moved by the sufferings of others who are persecuted because of their colour.’ Thus, Kamaladevi utilized a universalistic notion of humanity to explain her sympathy with the victims of racism worldwide. Her universalism did not prevent her from offering a more focused understanding of coloured solidarity. Prattis told his readers that Kamaladevi then held out her ‘plump brown arm’, pointed to her skin, and proclaimed, ‘Every time prejudice is shown against any colored people, I look at myself and I know that I am a victim, too.’

After this direct pronouncement of coloured unity, Kamaladevi added another universalistic statement, ‘There can be no peace in the world until there is freedom of all people. Freedom is indivisible.’

Courier readers moved by Prattis’s extensive portrait of Kamaladevi’s coloured cosmopolitanism did not have to go far to learn more. They needed only glance at the next page of the Courier, where Prattis arranged to have published a special message from Kamaladevi to the African American readers of the Courier. In her message, Kamaladevi again blended a universalistic humanism with a ringing endorsement of coloured solidarity. She explained her desire to publish in the Courier as a way to reach out to African Americans, who ‘like ourselves in this vast continent of Asia are waging the great battle of humanism.’ She then contrasted the material advances of ‘the white man’ with the past advances of ‘the colored man’ in Africa and Asia. Striking a strongly socialist tone, she added, ‘As long as one part of humanity stands condemned to a slum life, world conflict is bound to continue.’ Kamaladevi proclaimed, ‘The habit of determining social status by colour, belongs to an antiquated age of irrationalism, like magic, unworthy of the man of the atomic age.’ She concluded, ‘The Indian people have pledged to work and strive for a world order from which the vestiges of tyranny and exploitation be it racial or territorial are banished. For our own freedom assumes a reality only when the rest of mankind becomes genuinely free.’
**Conclusion**

In the preface to Kamaladevi’s autobiography, the writer Raja Rao described her as ‘firmly Indian and therefore universal’. Kamaladevi’s travels to the United States demonstrate the accuracy of Rao’s formulation. Kamaladevi’s coloured cosmopolitanism connected the national and the universal, allowing her to understand Indian freedom as interconnected with the freedom of oppressed people throughout the world. Crucially, Kamaladevi’s humanism sprang from her recognition of herself as a ‘coloured woman’. Her coloured cosmopolitanism bridged the nation and the globe, envisioning Indian independence not merely as the culmination of years of struggle, but as a crucial step toward the liberation of the entire coloured world.

Kamaladevi’s coloured cosmopolitanism built on a long history of interconnections between Indian and African American freedom struggles. While the Second World War brought these connections to fruition, Indian independence and the Cold War infused them with political consequences. But this was about more than the Cold War. On July 4, 1944, Gandhi told an American reporter, ‘Freedom for India will bring hope to Asiatics and other exploited nations. Today there is no hope for the Negroes, but Indian freedom will fill them with hope.’ Indians, including Kamaladevi, played a crucial role in inspiring that hope. Kamaladevi later served as India’s delegate to the UN Rights Commission. When the US decided not to ratify UN Human Rights Conventions, a Black newspaper based in Harlem quoted Kamaladevi condemning the move.

On June 7, 1892, Homer Plessy purposely courted arrest on a racially segregated train, giving his name to the infamous American Supreme Court decision *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) that inscribed in law the doctrine of ‘separate but equal’, used for decades to defend Jim Crow. Plessy’s train was bound for Covington, Louisiana from New Orleans, not far from where Kamaladevi herself took a stand by keeping her seat. One year after Plessy’s arrest, on a cold night in 1893, another young man, a lawyer recently trained in London,
was forced off a train in Pietermaritzburg, South Africa. Mohandas Gandhi had paid for a first class ticket, not knowing that the colour of his skin would deny him the use of it. After spending a cold night on a deserted railway station and suffering physical and verbal abuse from a stagecoach driver, Gandhi eventually reached his destination, Pretoria. There, it was an African American man who helped Gandhi locate an inn that would admit an Indian. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks kept her seat on a bus in Montgomery, Alabama. Like Homer Plessy, Parks had planned her protest, and like Plessy she was arrested. Her courage sparked a boycott that focused the attention of the world on Montgomery and a young twenty-five year-old pastor named Martin Luther King. Gandhi and King, two men who never met, have become intertwined in a popular story about the triumph of ‘non-violence’. That story ignores the many ways in which the United States and India – often celebrated as the world’s largest democracies – continue to struggle to live up to their democratic principles. Kamaladevi’s story reveals the broader history of interconnections between Indians and African Americans, a history full of promise that remains to be achieved.

Notes


7. See Indian Political Intelligence (IPI) 16, Microfiche # 570, File 635 (1939), Oriental and Indian Office Collections, British Library.

8. See, for example, George Padmore, ‘Protest Flogging of Gandhi Followers’, *Chicago Defender*, September 5, 1942, pg. 1; ‘India Grows’, *Chicago Defender*, May 15, 1943, pg. 14; ‘News and Views on the Colored World’, *Chicago Defender*, March 18, 1944, pg. 13. Padmore met Jawaharlal Nehru in London in 1938 and later sent him a note thanking him for a ‘very interesting’ conversation on ‘problems of common interest’. He also sent Nehru a copy of one of his books. See George Padmore to Jawaharlal Nehru, Volume 78, Jawaharlal
Nehru [henceforth JN] Papers, Nehru Memorial Museum & Library [henceforth NMML], Delhi.

9. On Menon’s years in London, see Suhash Chakravarty, *V. K. Krishna Menon and the India League, 1925–47* (New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications, 1997); Indian Political Intelligence (IPI) 16, Microfiche # 570, File 635 (1939), Oriental and Indian Office Collections, British Library; Menon’s correspondence with his invitees is in Box 2, File 27 of the V. K. Krishna Menon Papers, NMML; Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, *Inner Recesses*, 232.

10. These records, part of the Indian Political Intelligence files were made public only in the late 1990s. See N Sangulee to Lord Zetland and Note to ‘Mr. Silver’, Indian Political Intelligence (IPI) 16, Microfiche # 570, File 635 (1939), Oriental and Indian Office Collections, British Library.


12. ‘Britain is Assailed for Plight of India’, *The New York Times*, December 18, 1939, pg. 18; James Williams to Nehru, March 6, 1940, Volume 103, JN Papers, NMML; Nehru to Kamaladevi, September 25, 1940, Volume 38, JN Papers, NMML.

13. Kamaladevi’s talk at Hobart College, for example, was sponsored by several local women’s clubs as well as by the League of Women Voters. James Williams to Nehru, March 6, 1940, Volume 103, JN Papers, NMML; Elizabeth La Hines, ‘India Advanced in Equal Rights’, *New York Times*, Nov. 26, 1939; Kamaladevi, *Inner Recesses*, 238–243.


16. Ibid., 128–129.

17. As the president of the Fellowship of Reconciliation, Muste mentored Civil Rights pioneers, including James Farmer and Bayard Rustin, who themselves also drew extensively on the example of Gandhi and the Indian freedom struggle more broadly. See Jo Ann Ooiman Robinson,


22. J.J. Singh to Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, June 20, 1944, J.J. Singh Papers, NMML; See ‘Professor Basil Mathews to Mr. Joyce’, November 6, 1939, Microfiche 77; Roger Baldwin to JN, January 31, 1940, Volume 6, JN Papers, NMML.


24. This was the same Meherally that had helped connect Kamaladevi to the world of pan-Africanism by writing George Padmore about her arrival in London.

25. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Uncle Sam’s Empire (Bombay: Padma Publications, 1944), 49.

27. Ibid., 189, 70, 113–141, 144–145, 177, 192–204.
28. Ibid., 178, 179, 188.
29. Ibid., 184.
30. Ibid., 185.
31. Ibid., 187.
33. Kamaladevi, America, 209.
41. Kamaladevi, Inner Recesses, ix.
42. Interview to Stuart Gelder, July 4, 1944.