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Kamaladevi's Vision of
Handicraft Cooperatives:
A Personal Narrative

by
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Kamaladevi's Vision of Handicraft Cooperatives: A Personal Narrative *

I write this memoir on the occasion of a celebration to commemorate the life of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, freedom fighter and visionary, for whom no hurdles were insurmountable. Kamaladevi took upon herself many challenges, the task of rehabilitating refugees after the Partition of India being one of them. She overcame the turmoil of post-Partition to bring to life her vision of revitalising the crafts and looms of India in the spirit of cooperatives. She wanted to ensure that the refugees, for what they had gone through, lived with dignity and with self-esteem, not on charity.

In 1947, when India attained Independence, the situation of crafts and craftspersons was abysmal, even in those areas not directly affected by Partition. Highly skilled workers, who had earlier thrived on patronage, were now almost completely deprived of it. The British had just left India, and the royalty and nobility were not in a position to lavish favours. They had themselves lost their revenues, with kingdoms, princely states and fiefdoms becoming a part of the Republic. The movement of refugees to India completely disrupted the village economy where, earlier, products of different castes were bartered. The uprooted villagers went wherever they could find a place and settled down in jobs and crafts that may have been different from their earlier occupations.

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* Talk by Gulshan Nanda as part of the programme, 'To Remember Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay,' on 13 April 2013.

Lakshmi Chand Jain—Lakshmi, to us all—a student leader and a Master’s student in Delhi University, gave up his education to volunteer with the relief operations set up for these refugees. He began by helping in Hudson Lines, one of the biggest of the Kingsway Camps, with whatever he could do, including pacifying the angry refugees. Along with other volunteers, Lakshmi worked incessantly to normalise life for the traumatised refugees.

Food, shelter, health care, education and the basic needs of life had been taken care of, both from private donations and governmental assistance. It was when they had just about settled the day-to-day life of the refugees in the camp that they had a visitor. She admired their work but just before leaving the camp, Kamaladeviiji asked Lakshmi very gently: ‘What about their future? How long will they live in camps?’ He responded that he was equally concerned about their future—in fact, some of the refugees had also voiced the same concern to him. He, however, had not been able to give this matter serious thought because of his immediate preoccupations. The problem, he pointed out, could not be considered uniformly as some of the inmates were agriculturists and others from diverse vocations.

Within two days Lakshmi received a call from Kamaladeviiji to attend a meeting she was chairing. At this meeting she spoke about her visit to the camp, the efforts that were already being made, and her grave concern as well as the urgent need to think about the future of these displaced people. Could they live in these camps forever, she asked? Her question provoked the organisers and thinkers to deliberate on the future of the refugees. Weighing the alternatives led them to a unanimous solution: self-help in the form of cooperatives. Only cooperatives could help at a time like this, when faced by the scale of a problem such as this in addition to meagre resources.

Almost overnight, the Indian Cooperative Union (ICU), with Kamaladeviiji as its President, and Lakshmi as a promoter, came into existence. This was the mother-cooperative which went on to form several cooperatives that were to settle

agriculturists in Chattarpur, and people from the North West Frontier Province (NWFP) in Faridabad.

In its effort to locate vacant land, the ICU found that Chattarpur had large stretches of farm land that had been abandoned by agricultural landlords who had migrated to Pakistan. It had been self-allotted to several senior government officers, whose families had left behind similar lands in Pakistan. In fact, they had requested the Kingsway Camp to help them find labour to till the soil, for each officer had as much as 1,000 to 2,000 acres. The ICU was willing to provide farmers, not as labour, but as owners. The owners, however, refused to part with this land, even though they did not live on it. Nevertheless, the ICU decided to occupy the land, and one day decided to move 200 families with basic equipment and six-months' ration to live there and start work on this land. Pandit Nehru intervened, and later withdrew the orders for the previous allotment—this land was then allotted to the farmers but, unfortunately, not to the cooperative. This also implied that the refugees, who now took over ownership of the land, were free to sell it. Over time, the refugees did indeed sell this land and what we see today in the same area are large farmhouses belonging to the rich and elite.

The refugees from NWFP were given land to build their own township in Faridabad. A Multipurpose Cooperative was then formed and N.N. Datta—another colleague who later worked at Cottage Industries—who was from that area and knew the language, was made the Camp Commander. Today, Faridabad is a flourishing industrial township.

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and went to work with great compassion for the despairing refugee women. Rajesh Nandini, a Professor of History from Islamia College, was herself a refugee from Lahore. She chose to volunteer for refugee relief instead of continuing to teach. Despite her recent bereavement, Mrs. Vir Singh, a war widow, volunteered at Kingsway Camp. There were many others who helped in various ways. The camp had many student volunteers who were forced to abandon their final year of graduation midway because of Partition. They were promised graduate degrees by the University in lieu of six months of voluntary service in the camps.

Rajesh Nandini became their guide and mentor and took the initiative to bring some normalcy to the life of the women. After the women had settled into some semblance of routine life, they had a lot of time on their hands. Back in the Punjab, women spent time with each other in social activities. They would sit together, embroider, cook, and sing songs as a community. In their current life as refugees all they could do was share their miseries and horrifying experiences. In their spare time, they remained preoccupied with what they had recently suffered. Rajesh Nandini asked the student volunteers to identify women with the ability to sew and embroider using traditional stitches for which Punjab was well known. This was done to identify ways in which women could be engaged in economic activities.

Based on their assessment, the volunteers began organising the women's activity around handicrafts. Twenty machines were brought from the All India Congress Committee Office, arranged for by Sucheta Kriplani. Meanwhile, Sardar Patel had already been sending truckloads of fabric donated by mills in Ahmedabad. The volunteers were asked to segregate fabric suitable for garments, and for embroidered table and bed linen.

Rajesh Nandini would cut 20 to 30 salwar kameez every morning that the women would sew on the newly acquired machines. They were paid four *annas* per piece (one-fourth of a rupee). This way, most of them could earn eight *annas* a day. Whatever they stitched was sold the next day within the camp for a profit of ₹ 1. The money was circulated back to the women as wages.

Mrs. Vir Singh took charge of the linen and would ask the women to cut the fabric according to the sizes she gave them. She also suggested the designs and layouts for embroidery on mats, tableclothes, tea-cosy sets, cushions and bed covers. Once a bulk was ready, they had to think about what was to be done with these. Fori Nehru spoke to Mr. Haksar, the proprietor of Pandit Brothers, the biggest linen store in Connaught Place. He was kind enough to give them one counter to sell linen made by the refugees. By this time, other women too from civil society had joined this endeavour. With just word-of-mouth publicity, one morning the linen was put up for sale. And what a resounding success it was! Sales began to be carried out on a regular basis and orders kept pouring in. Thus the orders were booked in advance, fabric was issued from the camp stores, embroidery was done, and finished goods delivered to enthusiastic customers.

This sale of embroidered linen became so popular that one counter in Pandit Brothers became too small an area. Many of the customers were women who were well-off and eager to help the cause. More orders kept pouring in and Sheela Puri took charge of executing them. This, in my view, was the foundation of retailing in India.

With increased sales and production, Haksar felt the shop was getting overcrowded and, as a result, sales would suffer. Fori Nehru then stepped in to get a shop allotted to the Kingsway Camp group on Barakhamba Radial Road in Connaught Place. Called Refugee Handicrafts, it was administered by the ICU and Mrs. Vir Singh took over as Manager.

Meanwhile, the Ministry of Commerce had set up a shop in 1948 called the Central Cottage Industries Emporium to sell handicrafts made by displaced craftsmen, which was not doing very well. The success of Refugee Handicrafts prompted the Ministry of Commerce to offer the Cottage Emporium to ICU. In

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This was the time I was invited to join the Emporium. My association with Lakshmi had already begun by that time as I worked with him, and my sister Rajesh Nandini, at the camp as a volunteer. As soon as I completed my Master's degree in Economics from Delhi University I received a telegram from Lakshmi asking me to join the Cottage Emporium. My designation was Sales Assistant and my salary was ₹ 140. The premises were the barracks on Janpath that the army had vacated when the British moved out.

In 1952, the Ministry of Commerce formed five Boards—All India Handicrafts Board, All India Handloom Board, Khadi and Village Industries, Silk Board, and Coir Board. Kamaladeviji became the first President of the Handicrafts Board and Lakshmi its Member Secretary. By then Lakshmi was no longer associated with the Faridabad project and was already the General Secretary of the ICU in New Delhi.

In its first Handicrafts Marketing Conference, the Handicrafts Board invited the Indian Cooperative Union to undertake a survey of handicrafts in the country. The team, led by the eminent economist, Professor Raj Krishna, and coordinated by Lakshmi, travelled through 12 states of the country for 18 months to study the condition of crafts.

This was a historical, one-of-a-kind detailed and comprehensive study that also led to insights on what steps needed to be taken to improve crafts as a sector. They examined private marketing, interstate and foreign trade, purchase policy, consignment systems, payment of bills, treatment of artisans, costs, margins, sales promotion, display, publicity, markets and cooperatives as a system of organisation. A qualitative study of each craft was conducted, where the team talked with managers and proprietors of small, medium and large units of production. It also studied the marketing structure in each state.

The survey team concluded that the radical improvement of production is a precondition to any expansion of sales. Three important aspects were highlighted: quality control, technical research, and training and design development. The publicity and treatment of artisans were equally valued.

The Report findings also laid the foundations of the guidelines to running the Central Cottage Industries Emporium. This survey was followed by another extensive tour to explore the situation of crafts. A team from Cottage, led by Mrs. Singh, travelled throughout the country to judge the report of the survey team for themselves, to get acquainted with the craftsmen, and order stocks for the Emporium. Armed with both—the survey reports and Mrs. Vir Singh's travel reports—Cottage swung into action by implementing many of its recommendations. It required a lot of hard work, but the staff was so enthusiastic and committed that there was always optimism and willingness to put in one's best.

I have always regretted not being a part of this tour. Mine was the duty of opening and closing the Emporium every day and since it was a very responsible job, I could not be spared. As compensation for my disappointment, Mrs. Vir Singh asked Krishna Kapur, who was travelling with her, to give me a saree that she had bought from Bengal Home Industries in Calcutta. I paid an extravagant ₹ 45 for this beautiful Murshidabad silk saree—magenta, with an all-over *buti* print in white—that I can still recall even today.

Gradually, as more and more stocks were added, additional space was needed. Lakshmi found an architect, Cyrus Jhapwala, who magically expanded the ten-counter corridor with a room at the end, to an expanse that gave us ample space to fit in all the departments—a special area for carpets, an extra shed for furniture and furnishings, display windows facing the main road, and a lobby area for special displays and exhibitions. How the area for special displays came to be named a VIP area remains a mystery—perhaps it was meant for VIP items, not persons. A first floor was created for fabrics, sarees, ready-to-wear for men, women and children, with a little counter for toys tucked away between the boys' wear and girls' wear. This kept the children busy while their parents shopped.

To fulfil the many objectives that Cottage had for its growth, a number of new sections were added. Mallika, the flower shop at the entrance, which helped the floriculturists of Chattarpur, and also added colour and fragrance; Rachna, a music and bookshop, frequented by scholars, casual readers and authors alike; and Kunika, an art gallery that displayed paintings and had a framing section as well. It attracted artists and art lovers alike. The most popular venue, however, was Bankura, the café, that was frequented by customers—a rendezvous for those who always parted with 'see you at Cottage'. Our first lunch, served by its manager Mrs. Kharas, cost us only ₹ 1.

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A private-order counter, which was started with Refugee Handicrafts, was expanded to undertake special orders for all items. A production centre had already been set up on Deendayal Upadhaya Marg, with a tailors' cooperative. They made garments for men, women and children, for sale at Cottage, and also took individual orders. A ticket counter was set up next to it for the sale of tickets to various cultural shows in the city. This attracted diverse types of customers from different social classes.

In the execution of Cottage, the first priority was to link the sale of craft to an all-India production base. Ethical methods of craft purchases and marketing were given equal weight. Goods that were earlier mostly taken on consignment were now purchased. The profit was shared with the artisans, wherein a part of it went towards their welfare. The terms of trade now benefited the producers. Budgets were planned and craftsmen were given regular orders to prepare in advance for the selling season. Buyers were chosen with great care, ensuring their aptitude and ability to select the right merchandise. They were also expected to help the craftsmen in developing designs that were contemporary.

A Planning and Promotion Division with designers and knowledgeable persons was working around the clock to help craftspersons in these efforts. The mandate for the buyers was that if a craftsman came with samples that could not be sold, he had to be guided to make saleable products with assistance from the Planning and Promotion Division.

When the first ever post-independence classification of handicrafts and handlooms was conducted, each department was given an alphabetic identity according to its usage. Numeric codes indicated subheads of each department, according to the area of procurement and the raw material used. So wood became a separate subhead, and papier mache had its own identity in the gift department. Similarly, sarees from Varanasi and Kancheevaram had different subheads. Each item had a price tag that carried all this information, along with the month and year of purchase.

Regular analyses of sales on a daily basis made information available to buyers on what was sold, which enabled them to plan their purchases in time for the sales' season. They were also able to share this information with the producers, thus helping in improving the quality of the merchandise.

All of this made Cottage the most desirable shopping venue in Delhi. Our exhibitions were carefully curated for different themes and subjects. This was done almost a year in advance giving designers, buyers, artisans and tailors enough time. Very often, designers made samples that went through an internal scrutiny by buyers before being finalised. Ratna Fabri, and later Sina Kaul, with teams of display artistes created the most unusual displays, highlighted by Som Benegal's innovative advertisements. Our logo, the Bankura horse, was brought by Kamaladeviji on a trip to Bengal. She fell in love with the beautiful, long-necked, terracotta horse with detachable ears that was sitting in a corner in a potter's house in the village of Bankura.

Our exhibitions were a great draw. The first major one was of handicrafts from Kashmir for which I was sent for a month to Srinagar to source items to be

developed for the exhibition. It was a beautiful exhibition, in which our young salesgirls were all dressed in *firans*, with a central display of a Shikara filled with apples. Being petite, I wore one of Mrs. Vir Singh's kurtas to make it appear like a firan. Suneet, Mrs. Vir Singh's 11-year-old daughter, sat in the shikara dressed as a Kashmiri girl, also in her mother's oversized kurta.

Cottage was on the itinerary of every visiting dignitary, including the Queen of England and Jackie Kennedy. The Queen even bought a reversible dupion coat, which she wore to the President's banquet, creating news because the Queen's wardrobe was always fixed in advance.

One of the effects of Cottage's prosperity and growth was to encourage private entrepreneurs to set up handicraft shops. These mushroomed and dotted every tourist route and nearly all the important monuments in the country. On Janpath itself, and in Connaught Place, private trade flourished. In a way, this was good as craftsmen and artists were able to find a market for all that they produced.

However, the spirit of the cooperatives soon started to diminish. With so much private enterprise, the staff began to compare their emoluments with market rates, and trade unions stepped in to take up this cause under political leadership. The ICU withdrew at this point as it found that the principles of its cooperative—to set a band for a minimum and maximum salary—were being compromised. The government took over the Emporium, which was then at the peak of its glory.

The handicrafts sector has grown in the last 60 years, encompassing all aspects of human existence. However, it has no identity of its own. It is second only to agriculture in employment generation. Fragmented, it occupies an insignificant little corner in various ministries with larger mandates of their own, spanning a large and often non-convergent agenda, such as ministries for Textiles, for Commerce, for Culture, for Tribal Affairs, and for Medium and Small-Scale Enterprises.

Hands that create are accorded the lowest priority in the policy structure. From self-reliant creators, craftspersons and weavers have become dependent on doles,

which come in bits and pieces through the various schemes of different ministries. That is not how Kamaladevi had imagined their future. It disturbs all of us who have believed in her philosophy and vision. Kamaladevi had visualised a bright future for the handmade, which flourished with her efforts and those of us in civil society who shared her vision and conviction.

As Lakshmi noted:

The success of these endeavors rested on the shoulders of the team at ICU and the wider circles of civil society that we drew in. And at the center of it was Kamaladevi. She was not a solo actress. She was a magnet who drew hundreds of men and women young and old to every movement or course she stepped into. All she did was to share the concern and measure the response...for those who showed a little spark, she lit the fire. She had no patronage to distribute; she did not attract any sycophants. Yet people flocked to her; but around her it was always a crowd of comrades in a common purpose...she is my inspiration not for the success that she was able to grasp, but for the pursuit of the unaccomplished tasks of India's second revolution to which she dedicated herself with all her heart and soul (Jain, 2011).

I did not work directly with Kamaladevi on a day-to-day basis. We met her whenever she came to Cottage, a beautiful softspoken woman who wore the most elegant ethnic sarees. For several of us at Cottage, it was Lakshmi who brought to us the spirit and enthusiasm of Kamaladevi. Through him, she was our inspiration. He brought Kamaladevi's vision to life for us.

And it was Mrs. Vir Singh who always held our hand and guided us to do what was right. Most of the others are gone but Fori Nehru, who is 104 years old, still remembers all of us and meets us most affectionately. Lakshmi too is no more but some of us are still working in Srinagar for an initiative called 'Commitment to Kashmir' to encourage educated young men and women with a background

in craft to become entrepreneurs and guide other artisans and skilled craftspersons.

In conclusion, I would like to say that I was singularly lucky in working to fulfil Kamaladeviji's vision. Working with such visionary people has given me an extremely happy and enriching life. The last time I met her was two weeks before she went to Bangalore, never to return. She poured me a cup of tea with her own hands and spoke about Cottage, wanting me to work on more exhibitions of lesser-known crafts—with her persistence, she lit the little fire that still burns within me.

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Gulshan Nanda is one of the leading exponents in the field of handicrafts and has worked over the last five and a half decades with commitment, passion and vision in the area of handicraft and handloom development. As the Chairperson of Cottage, her goal was to reposition Cottage as a premier crafts institution in the country.

She has coordinated several international meetings such as the IIC- Asia project 'Sui Dhaga' exhibition with the aim of crossing boundaries with embroidery crafts. She was awarded the Kamala Samaan by the Crafts Council of India in 2007 and the Padmashree for her contributions to handicrafts in 2011.



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