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INTERVIEW WITH KAMLA BHASIN

Capitalist patriarchy – the new enemy

Kamla Bhasin. Photo: Jannatul Mawa

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Meeting Kamla Bhasin is like getting a booster shot of energy and optimism. Her vivacity and enthusiasm will catch you unawares and force you out of whatever cynicism is afflicting you. And cynicism in a world so full of injustice and superficiality is a comfort that is hard to let go of. But Kamla, at age 70 - it was her birthday on April 24 – has given feminism a much needed sanguine spin. She is kind of a brand ambassador for 'South- South cooperation' bringing together men and women from South Asia, to learn from each others' experiences in the hope of bringing greater understanding and camaraderie in a region so divided by political, economic and religious rifts. For the last 40 years she has been coming to Bangladesh speaking on

uncomfortable things like patriarchy, gender inequality, sexual violence. Kamla talks about such sensitive issues with a simplicity, wit and clarity, making her one of the most compelling speakers one could have the privilege of listening to. I remember one such lecture – perhaps a good ten to fifteen years ago – that had left me riveted. Hence my elation at the prospect of interviewing her a few days ago.

Clad in her newly acquired Grameen check kurta, “for my birthday” as she puts it, Kamla looks very much the 'development feminist' she calls herself. She is still the silver-haired champion of the marginalised, with piercing eyes and that straightforward eloquence that makes her the perfect interviewee.

I know my time with her is limited yet cannot resist from asking her to begin from the beginning.

It was 1975, Kamla, then a twenty something young woman, was working for FAO and was assigned to identify innovative development work in Asian countries and create networks between people –across countries. “At that time none of us, not a single NGO, knew anyone across the border” Kamla explains, “Indians didn't know Bangladeshis, Bangladeshis didn't know Indians, Nepalis didn't know Pakistanis – there was NO contact. So the purpose was what later became known as South South cooperation at the people level”.

At the time – mid to late 70s, this was no easy task. There was a lot of animosity, says Kamla, between countries. But Kamla, persistently pursued the idea and eventually managed to hold a South Asian workshop in Dhaka attended by women from all these countries. It was for the first time that Bangladeshis realised that “not everyone in Pakistan was responsible for the atrocities, that there were people there who were actually against those policies, that governments don't represent our people, and that we need to start to rebuild those bridges- at least among our civil society actors”.

It was also when Kamla met Zafrullah Chowdhury and was completely wowed by what he had achieved with Gonoshashtya Kendra. “If anyone has thought 'out of the box' in South Asia, it was this man. The way he started training women paramedics, drivers, security guards, was amazing. In our jargon we call this 'gender transformating' - when you change the definition of a woman or a man, you transform gender. Now gender is a social definition– of a man or a woman. A girl – can drive a car, ride a bicycle – so when this man gave them jobs as paramedics the first thing he told them is that you have to ride a bicycle and that was for me, a revolution for Bangladesh.”

Thus for Kamla, such development miracles also organically became lessons in gender politics. There was also a kind of awakening in the world in general. In '75 the first global conference on women had taken palce (in Mexico) and NGOs in the field, says Kamla, were realising two things : Firstly that development from top was not reaching the poor – it was reaching the elite of the villages, of our countries. Secondly, they realised that development was not reaching women and these kinds of insights were coming from Africa, Latin America and Asia based on the work of NGOs that were working with people not government.

She was invited by development activists from all over South Asia to hold gender training

workshops. She challenged patriarchy and even the language of patriarchy: “The word 'swami' (husband), for example, it means malik or owner. But the constitution says that Bangladeshi women cannot have an owner or master – they can have a partner – so swami is anti Bangladesh constitution as far as I'm concerned and similarly 'pati' is against the Indian Constitution. No Indian citizen can have a pati controlling her. Even the word'husband' is sick – it comes from animal husbandry; to husband is to control or domesticate.”

Kamla's deep understanding of gender issues at the grassroots level comes from her own experience growing up in the villages of India – her father , a medical doctor, was posted at various villages where she attended school up till matriculation. She went to a government university and got her Bachelors and Masters degree “with second division – so had a bad education but learnt a lot of common sense”. Later, she went on to study Sociology of Development at Muenster University in Germany with a fellowship.

In 2002 she resigned from UN and gave all her time to the feminist network she had helped to set up called Sangat, an informal network of which anyone can be a member.

Kamla rejects the notion that feminism is a western concept. From a development worker she also became a feminist development worker and therefore at the conscious level, a feminist. This is the story of many others says Kamla.

“We didn't become feminists by reading western feminist theories” adds Kamla, “we became feminists by looking at the realities of women in the villages e.g. what was dowry doing to women, about domestic violence, how women were being treated at home and in society…”

But feminist theory in the formal sense was also important and Kamla and her fellow activists started inviting to their workshops, academics – social scientists, political scientists and economists who were feminists and were working on feminist theories. The marriage between theory and action was made.

Kamla also started writing about these issues in courses which became very important resource material - booklets on understanding patriarchy, gender. They were also translated into 25 to 30 languages. The movement that Kamla and her fellow activists started moreover, got rid of binary divisions: “One of my slogans is 'I am not a wall that divides, I am a crack in that wall. So all these walls of nationalities – Bangladeshi, Pakistani, Indian, we become cracks in these walls and we go across borders and make friends. Pakistani women were the first to apologise for the genocide here – Pakistani feminists.”

Cultural expression was the most effective tool to reach the messages of equality. From the very beginning music, dance and posters have been part of Kamla's work especially in reaching an audience that was mostly illiterate. She wrote a hundred songs and compiled them into CDs and had posters with slogans such as 'Zero tolerance for violence against women' , 'men of quality are not afraid of equality' 'Honour killing – no honour in Killing' etc. translated in the vernacular.

But despite such dedication and innovative feminist efforts we are in a world where violence against women is alive and kicking and objectification of women is at its zenith. When I ask why

Kamla's answer is simple: 'Capitalist patriarchy' along with religious and cultural patriarchy. She cites the pornography industry which is a billion dollar industry that reduces women (and children) into objects of sex. The cosmetics industry says Kamla promotes the idea that a woman is just a body and unless she decorates herself in this way she is nothing. Women have been reduced to being just bodies – perfected through surgeries and procedures. “So once you are a body – what's the harm in raping you or groping you?” Kamla asks. In a capitalist patriarchy, she says, everything saleable is sold and profit predominates over people.

Patriarchy, says Kamla, is equally damaging for men because it dehumanises and brutalises them.

“One other thing” she adds, “our struggle for gender equality is not a fight between men and women. It is a fight between two ideologies- two ways of thinking – one is that patriarchy is better, men are superior. The other says no, equality is better, men and women are different and equal and equality is good for all. And that men must realise that unless women are free men cannot be free.”

With that provocative comment my interview with this innovative, compassionate development feminist, comes to an end. I still have so many questions but reluctantly I relent remembering that she has a birthday to celebrate.

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