

'Give men eye-patches instead of giving burkhas to women'

Prominent South Asian feminist activist *Kamla Bhasin* talks about violence against women and the challenges to movements against capitalist patriarchy in South Asia to *Tamanna Khan* of *The Daily Star*.

Tamanna Khan (TK): Why do you think we still witness many young educated men perpetrating violence against women despite all the campaigns on VAW?

Kamla Bhasin (KB): For me the priority is to understand why the crime is being done. What is happening to human being that they are getting more and more de-humanised? We are saying literacy level is 90% in South Asia, education is increasing, science is spreading, but along with that religious fundamentalism is increasing, number of women in burkhas and purdah is increasing, and there is no reduction in violence against women as well as other people.

While the women's movement is working against violence, the corporate media, Bollywood and Hollywood are producing and reproducing violence, showing our children thousands of rapes every day. With the help of the cosmetic industry, they show women as objects and sex objects for the benefit of men, and macho and violent men as super-men and anti-heroes who take the law in their hands.

The songs I write may reach, say, half a million people but a Bollywood song which is totally anti-women, horrible and demeans men and women both, reaches a 100 million people. There is no comparison in the power they have. In the reality shows, four-year-old boys and girls are dancing to the most misogynistic songs. This is the corporate world and capitalist patriarchy we are facing, in which trafficking, pornography, cosmetics are billion dollar industries, while Barbie dolls and guns for boys are million dollar industries.

In America, despite good laws and

their implementation, intimate partner violence, campus and domestic violence exist. Corporate greed is spreading a very brutal and horrible kind of patriarchy. We can't fight patriarchy without fighting this kind of globalisation. Along with that we have to fight caste in India, and class and race in other countries because all of these work in conjunction with each other.

TK: How dedicated are politicians and government to the cause of stopping violence against women when in South Asian countries we often hear irresponsible remarks even by parliamentarians?

KB: A lot of like-minded politicians supported the One Billion Rising movement. But I think the women's movement is sometimes shy of approaching political leaders because our society is so divided on political lines. We don't want to approach right wing political parties and because of this we don't want to approach the other party so that we are not aligned with them.

As far as politicians are making patriarchal statements, and I won't call them anti-women only because this lady's statement two days ago was a statement very insulting for men (ruling party MP Rebeca Momen on November 27 said in a seminar at the National Press Club: "Rape and violence has increased in the country because of women's indecent movement and lack of discipline in families. It is only natural for men to attack, but if women do not qualify for respect then violence will keep on increasing"). She is turning Bangladeshi men into these helpless fellows who, as soon as they see a woman wearing less clothes, go for her. Are they that stupid and hungry?



We have been constantly focusing on the so-called victims of violence. I think the time has come to look at the perpetrators of violence. How can a man become so helpless? We women don't run after men when we see them half naked all the time, sitting at home wearing only lungi or gamcha or when they are urinating all over the place.

I would suggest that we give them [men] eye-patches instead of giving burkhas to women. They can then close their eyes and save themselves from the crimes that their eyes and hearts force them to commit, and it would be so much cheaper! For the cost of one burkha you could make about 200 eye-patches, and those are easy to sell and carry.

As far as the young women of South Asia are concerned, they are taking their constitutions seriously, which says that men and women are equal. We have the freedom given to us by our constitutions to be out on the roads when we want. Our women

will not be imprisoned anymore in their homes. It is the criminals who need to be imprisoned, not the victims. If families want to imprison anyone then logic says that they should tell their boys that they cannot be outside after 5 pm because they cannot be trusted, that they endanger women. So anyone who endangers other people should be at home, at jail or in the hospital for mental treatment.

TK: Does success of South Asian women threaten men?

KB: They definitely feel threatened. In a family, if a brother does not get a job and the sister gets a job, then the boy feels emasculated. He feels that the definition of a man is a bread winner. If a man cannot be a breadwinner, he feels like a failure as a man and he is frustrated and backlashes. They don't see women being treated equally at home. At home they see the father beating the mother and being called swami, pati or husband which are words for lord and

masters. So they believe they are lords and masters. We don't even have a word for life partner. First of all these words need to be banned, because they are anti-constitutional. Constitution says men and women are equal.

TK: What has the response to One Billion Rising (OBR) been in South Asia?

KB: We are now planning for the third year and the slogan this year is 'One Billion Rising Revolution.' We are very happy and very enthused by the global response to this campaign on Violence against Women (VAW). We know that this is the largest campaign ever on any subject on earth because people rose against violence in 205 countries of the world. This, of course, shows that VAW is a global disease. It is a pandemic. I call it the biggest war in the world. No war has affected over one billion people. The worst thing about this patriarchal war is that, unlike any other war, it takes place within the family.

OBR with its dance and music and because of the existence of social media helped us reach out to an earlier unreachable population which is middle-class and upper-middle class youth. But the population of young people of our countries is huge, so if five million participate in our programmes, there is another 10 million who do not. It shows that we still have to reach out to a lot more people.

TK: What has the women's movement in South Asia achieved and what challenges lie ahead?

KB: We have achieved a lot. Our laws are constantly being improved, we see women in every area of work doing excellent work. On the other hand there's capitalist patriarchy, with its pornography and cosmetics

industries. There are religious fundamentalists. Again, capitalist patriarchy is linked with religious fundamentalism, the latter often being a response to the former. They are like twin brothers.

In today's world there are economic wars going on because resources are scarce. There is corporate plunder. Everybody is economically insecure, even upper-middle class people. As insecurity increases, violence increases and thus dependence on religion increases. Because of all this, there is alienation. People leave families. So when fundamentalists come and organise them as Jamaat or RSS in my country, young people go for it. It is a very complex phenomenon and time. We can't look at violence against women as a separate issue.

What is heartening and encouraging is that at least our governments are continuously passing progressive, politically correct laws. As far as the implementations of laws are concerned that depends on the citizen of Bangladesh and India. I am one of those people who feel we need a new independence movement. The last independence movement did not free everyone. It did not free the poor or the adivasis. We need to make the excluded and marginalised groups free. Secondly, we need a cultural revolution to change our language and traditions such as those that prevent women from participating in the last rites. Schools, madrasas and media have to start this cultural revolution. Media is responsible for spreading patriarchy. There may be one good article in favour of gender equality but then most of the advertisements continue to be patriarchal. So I think we need a cultural revolution, a new *Muktir Andolon*.

Submit before Kalashnikovs or God?

SHAHNOOR WAHID

MUSLIMS in many countries, especially in Pakistan, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Syria and some countries in Africa, are now in a dilemma. Should they go by the edicts of the Holy Qur'an and Hadith or the diktats of various groups who go about imposing Islam pointing Kalashnikovs at them? Should they listen to one group of Muslims and send their girls to schools or should they listen to the other group(s) that imposes a ban on girls going to schools? How should they determine which group is right and which is not?

Nowadays, one group claims itself to be the followers of the "Purest" form of Islam and calls the other groups "Bidadis" (terming the rituals followed by the latter as *bidad*, meaning "un-Islamic"). Now Muslims have to obtain "Certificate" of a "True" Muslim from different groups. Today, Muslims do not sit on prayer mat at home to cry for salvation of their own soul. They must run to the nearest mosque to say their prayers under the watch of Kalashnikov-brandishing men. Women must run to the deepest crevice of their abode at the sound of 'bootsteps' of these men. Things are no more the same for those Muslims who want to delve in science and philosophy or partake in music and poetry. Everything is now determined by men going about with assault weapons. They are the complainants; they are the judges and they are the executioners -- all in one.

For the last 1400 years Muslims have been following the guidance given in the Holy Scriptures without the fear of any weapon pointed at them. It was genuine reverence for the Prophet (pbuh), his teachings and unwavering faith in the Holy Book that determined their level of religiosity.

Throughout the centuries parents and religious teachers have been teaching their wards and pupils everything about Islam while they lived among followers of different other religions and among those who formed different sects within Islam.

History tells us that Islam survived among Jews and Christians and survived all the great wars that have been fought by nations. It never required guns to pursue its followers to say their prayers and observe other rituals as per the Holy Book. But things are not the same anymore. Today we see use of rampant violence to impose Islam. We are appalled at the mindless bombing of mosques and market places, slitting of throats of journalists or aid workers before camera, shooting down children in schools, enslaving girls and forcing them into marriage and so on. If such violent means had been adopted by the preachers and rulers in the formative years of Islam, the number of Muslims surely would have been half of what it is today.

Can spirituality and devoutness swell up within a man's heart if he has to live under constant threat of receiving grave physical injury and death from assault weapons? Will he

be able to put his mind to work and prayer if his wife and daughter have to live under threat of being enslaved by fellow Muslims for not following their brand of Islam?

After 1400 years of Islam, my family members and friends who have been trying their best to follow the teachings of their ancestors and lead an honest life are now in utter confusion. Which group to believe? Which brand of Islam to follow? What is bidat and what is not bidat? Which interpretation of the Qur'an and Hadith is right? What is the guarantee that yet another new group of "True" Muslims will not emerge one day and call us heretics or apostates for following the wrong brand of Islam?

We wonder who is most knowledgeable and competent to tell us which interpretation of Qur'an and Hadith is perfect to follow so that no Kalashnikov will ever be pointed at us accusing us of committing *bidat*. We want to know fully about the things that are branded as bidat or "Un-Islamic" so that we may avoid doing such things. We see many different interpretations of the scriptures but we want to see a consensus among the various Islamic groups on these issues so that we may not arouse anger in one group while following the guidelines of another.

We are living in a state of confusion and we want answers from those who know best. We want a universally acceptable answer.

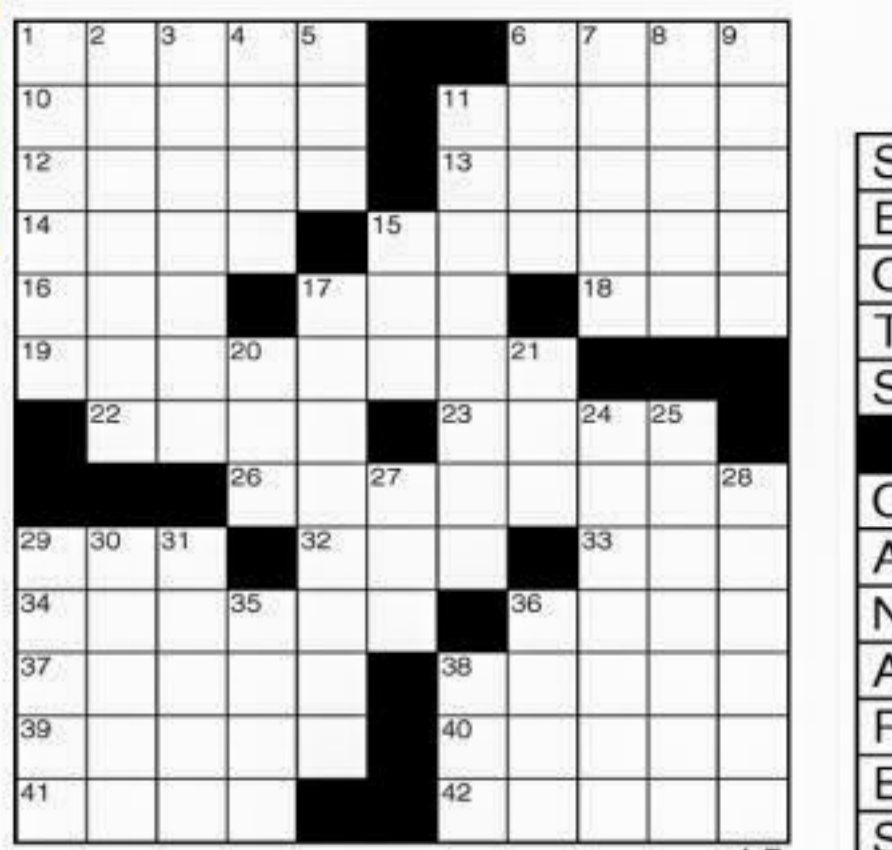
The writer is Special Supplements Editor, *The Daily Star*.



Those who make peaceful revolution impossible will make violent revolution inevitable.
John F. Kennedy

CROSSWORD by Thomas Joseph

- ACROSS**
- 1 Bashful
 - 6 Punching weapon
 - 10 Humble
 - 11 Trattoria fare
 - 12 Gives over
 - 13 English county
 - 14 Pine or palm
 - 15 Full grown
 - 16 Clock numeral
 - 17 Ship sealer
 - 18 Put a stop to
 - 19 Spice trade ships
 - 22 Drug agent
 - 23 Moonshine
- DOWN**
- 1 Bit of strategy
 - 2 From Portugal or Spain
 - 3 Dessert wine
 - 4 "Got it"
 - 5 -- Moines
 - 6 Swift
 - 7 Debate topic
 - 8 Boat's back
 - 9 Made demands on
 - 11 "Jeremy" band
 - 15 Writer Rita -- Brown
 - 17 What a news anchor looks into
- 20 Curved path**
- 21 Total**
- 24 Quivering dessert**
- 25 Like some doors**
- 27 Curtain holder**
- 28 Paddles**
- 29 Viper's poison**
- 30 Kitchen come-on**
- 31 Sad sack**
- 35 Home, informally**
- 36 Taboo act**
- 38 Musician's job**



Yesterday's answer

S	I	L	O	S	R	A	B	B	I
E	Q	U	A	L	A	L	L	E	N
C	U	C	K	O	O	C	L	O	C
T	I	C	T	R	E	N	A	N	
S	T	I	L	T	E	D	D	U	O
C	E	E	L	B	E	S	T		
C	E	D	E	D	C	A	S	E	S
A	Y	E	S	W	O	K			
N	E	B	P	A	L	E	A	L	E
A	H	A	R	I	D	T	O	T	
P	O	C	K	E	T	W	A	T	C
E	L	L	I	S	A	L	I	K	E
S	E	E	D	S	R	I	C	E	R

CRYPTOQUOTE 11-10
BKO RVDBK VP N LVVQ HG BV LO SONGIDOC LE RKNB EVI ZNM ZNDDENRNE PDVSHB. -- UNSOG LDEZO

Yesterday's Cryptoquote:
A WOMAN'S MIND IS CLEANER THAN A MAN'S: SHE CHANCES IT MORE OFTEN. -- OLIVER HERFORD

BEETLE BAILEY by Mort Walker



HENRY by Don Trachte

