

INTERVIEW WITH KAMLA BHASIN

Capitalist patriarchy – the new enemy

AASHA MEHREEN AMIN

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 Gonoshashya 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 transforming' - 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 place (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.



Kamla Bhasin PHOTO: JANNATUL MAWA

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.

The writer is Deputy Editor, Editorial & Op-ed, The Daily Star.

CLASS ACTION LAWSUITS IN US AND CANADA

Light of hope for Rana Plaza victims

MOSTAFA M NASER and NAVEED RAHMAN

ANOTHER anniversary of the deadliest garment industry disaster in history just passed by last week. The time is right to revisit the legal actions that have kept alive hopes of justice and fair compensation in victims and their family members.

The Rana Plaza disaster left 1,134 garment factory workers dead and another 2,500 seriously injured. Those who survived the disaster are left with endless suffering. The families of deceased workers continue to feel traumatised, as credibly evidenced by various media reports and exploratory studies, such as the recent study published by ActionAid Bangladesh and CPD. It is clear that there are significant unmet rehabilitation and support needs among the survivors. As the ActionAid study reveals, the limited rehabilitation services that may still be available to the victims are not adequate. Moreover, the question of management, equity and justice remains pertinent.

The criminal cases filed against the owner of the building and other individuals, including public officials responsible for the disaster, have seen no progress at the court. There can be no question that compensation for the losses suffered is of no less importance than the punishment of the guilty, especially seeing how the victims belong to the poorest sections of our society, and many families have lost their sole breadwinner and are worse off than they were before the incident. When we say 'justice' for the victims of the disaster, we are not talking just about prosecuting the owner of the building and factories or the public entities that could have prevented this disaster from happening; we also want to identify all stakeholders who have contributed to the disaster and profited from the hard work of the garment workers. The government, factory owners, buying houses and buyers should all be held accountable under law for their respective roles in causing this man-made disaster. They should be held legally accountable and made



PHOTO: STAR

to provide compensation to the survivors and family members of the deceased workers, who have suffered profound losses and damage. Only then we can achieve meaningful justice for the innocent victims of Rana Plaza disaster.

Apart from criminal prosecution of the perpetrators and their abettors who are responsible for the incident, it is pertinent to determine the tortious liability of the corporate buyers, i.e. the international companies which sourced garments from factories located in the building whether through intermediaries, such as buying houses, or directly. It is important to determine their contribution to this catastrophe, and revisit the legal remedies available to the victims of this disaster. Where

criminal law focuses on the person committing the crime and his punishment, tort law focuses on the injured and the victim and seeks to compensate him for losses to his person and property.

It is indeed a sign of optimism that many victims of the Rana Plaza collapse have already brought class actions against the buyers based in Canada and USA in the courts of the respective countries, seeking claims of compensation from the buyers for their contribution to the incident. In Canada, the Notice of Action for nearly US\$ 2 billion was filed at the Ontario Superior Court on behalf of the victims on April 22, 2015 against Loblaw Inc. and its Joe fresh brand, which used to source from New Wave Style Ltd, a garment factory located within Rana Plaza. The

American lawsuit, currently before a Delaware Court, was filed against J.C. Penney, The Children's Place and Walmart, and the amount being sought has been left open.

While none of these cases have been decided as yet, the victory of the Rana Plaza victims will be dependent on whether or not the buyers were negligent on their part and whether - (a) these international companies owed a duty of care to the employees of the suppliers, i.e. the victims and their dependents, and (b) there was a breach of that duty. There is evidence in case law and elsewhere that the buyers owed a duty of care to the victims, who were the employees or family members of the employees of the suppliers.

The denial by the buyers that a duty of care

never existed is always accompanied by the argument of the Bangladeshi courts' lack of jurisdiction to try the international companies under tort law. While it is an unpleasant fact that our body of legislations and courts have not adequately developed to entertain tort cases or meaningfully prosecute large international companies that source from our factories through intermediaries, we are inspired to see that tort claims on behalf of Rana Plaza victims are being pursued in the US and Canada. After all, these companies are incorporated in countries where advanced judicial norms and practices are continually evolving to deliver justice to the victims of tortious acts and omissions. These courts in the US and Canada have already exercised jurisdiction in similar cases, and have been open to recognise new kinds of wrongs that are becoming commonplace as the world becomes more connected and large supply chains transcend boundaries.

The authors would like to take this opportunity to make a plea to all concerned authorities, policymakers and powers to take positive steps towards creating a supportive and responsive legislative, judicial, policy and administrative environment needed to address mass torts like Rana Plaza in Bangladesh.

It is heartening for everyone that the Rana Plaza victims have brought these class actions against the buyers in Canada and US. We believe that not only the victims of the Rana Plaza and their families, but all the citizens of our country troubled by these workers' frustrations, and all human beings the world over who are aware of their plight are eagerly waiting to see the outcome of the case, as they hope that the courts in the US and Canada see the merits of the actions and award the appropriate compensation that the victims deserve.

Mostafa M Naser teaches law at the University of Chittagong and Naveed Rahman is enrolled in the LLM Programme of the University of Dhaka.

QUOTABLE Quote

MICHEL FOUCAULT
French Philosopher and theorist.

Maybe the target nowadays is not to discover what we are but to refuse what we are.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- Annul
- Litmus reddener
- Artemis's twin
- Nuts
- Snakehaired Gorgon
- Patella's place
- Beach robe
- Musical flourish
- Hebrew letter
- Commotion
- Corporate drone's place
- Singer Torme
- Planet
- Pitch's kin
- Theater section
- Music's Yoko
- Doze
- Carolina bird
- Keep setting
- Alley prowlers
- "Lost Horizon" author
- Reed instrument
- Survive
- Uncool fellow
- Like Russian dolls

DOWN

- Motor part
- Clumsy guy
- Sign of approval
- Hen sound
- "Born Free" lion
- Bread buy
- Acid opposer
- Link
- Rink makeup
- Fawn's mother
- Striped pet
- Gentle ones
- Perfect
- Philatelist, e.g.
- Shop tool
- Ibis's cousin
- 25 Pans for hens
- Coffee dispenser
- Put a stop to
- Fuses
- Subsequently
- Script unit
- Take in
- Penny prez
- Chiding sound
- Smelter supply
- Composer Rorem

YESTERDAY'S ANSWER

R	E	W	E	D	G	O	F	A	R
A	D	E	L	E	A	D	O	R	E
J	E	F	F	R	I	D	G	E	S
A	N	T	T	E	N	S	A	T	

BOXER

S	A	T	Y	R	D	I	V	E	S	
A	G	O	G		F	I	R	E		
G	E	T	U	P		C	L	E	A	T
			M	A	P	L	E			
A	V	A	N	E	E	T	E	A		
J	E	F	F	D	A	N	I	E	L	
A	T	R	I	A		C	R	A	M	
R	O	O	T	S		H	A	L	O	S