

‘I’m not a wall that divides. I’m a crack in that wall.’

Feminist icon, educator, and author Kamla Bhasin passed away on September 25, 2021, at the age of 75. The Daily Star pays tribute to her rich legacy by reprinting an interview first published in 2016.



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 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 other’s 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, and sexual violence. Kamla talks about such sensitive issues with 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 10 to 15 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 (she was born on April 24, 1946)—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, Nepalīs didn’t know Pakistanīs—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 the 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 Dr Zafrullah Chowdhury and was completely wowed by what he had achieved with Gonoshasthaya 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. Think of a girl who can drive a car, ride a bicycle. So when this man gave them jobs as



Kamla Bhasin (1946-2021). PHOTO: COLLECTED FROM TWITTER

“We didn’t become feminists by reading western feminist theories. We became feminists by looking at the realities of women in the villages.”

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, development from the 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 the NGOs that were working with people, not governments.

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, 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; 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 until matriculation. She went to a government university and got her bachelors and master’s degrees “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 the Muenster University in Germany with a fellowship.

In 2002, she resigned from the 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,” she adds. “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 working on feminist theories. The marriage between theory and action was created.

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 ideology is that patriarchy is better, that 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.

Aasha Mehreen Amin is senior deputy editor, Editorial and Opinion, *The Daily Star*. The interview was originally published on April 30, 2016.

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

We need to talk about geoengineering



THERE is ultimately no way to stabilise the climate without addressing the fact that humans are emitting far too much carbon dioxide into the atmosphere, year after year. But cutting emissions is not the only response to the climate crisis, nor was it the one that scientists proposed over half a century ago in the first-ever government report on climate change.

To address the problem of “Atmospheric Carbon Dioxide,” noted former US President Lyndon B Johnson’s Science Advisory Committee, the “solution” could not be to emit less of the stuff, because that apparently seemed unimaginably costly and difficult to do. Instead, the committee suggested that the effects of excessive CO2 in the atmosphere might be mitigated by brightening the world’s oceans to radiate more heat back into space.

Since then, many additional methods of “geoengineering” have been proposed by both scientists and science-fiction authors alike. Some ideas are more realistic than others, and none can substitute for the top-order priority of severing the link between economic activity and CO2 emissions. Nonetheless, emissions represent only the first of many links in the long causal chain from economic activity to climate crisis.

Economic activity produces emissions that drive up atmospheric concentrations, which in turn increases temperatures, thereby creating new conditions that are damaging to human welfare. Whereas cutting CO2 and other greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions addresses the first part of the chain, climate adaptation concerns the latter end—from changing temperatures to the impact on society. But the tail end should not necessarily come last in the sequence of our response. If anything, we should have introduced more aggressive adaptation measures a long time ago.

This delay owes much to a previous, long-standing fear among environmentalists that the mere mention of adaptation would undermine the primary aim of cutting carbon emissions. According to this argument, adaptation would create a “moral hazard”: the

idea that insulating people from the consequences of their actions will lead them to engage in even riskier behaviour (think seat belts or condoms).

Most environmentalists have since changed their tune, however. In the mid-1990s, then US Vice-President Al Gore avoided discussing adaptation, lest it detract from carbon-cutting efforts. Yet, by the early 2000s, he and most others had begun to include it as a point of emphasis alongside mitigation. And by 2013,

vulnerable to deforestation and natural disasters. Other more high-tech methods could put carbon back into the geosphere, storing it permanently underground (from where it came before it was burned as fossil energy).

As with adaptation in earlier decades, the prospect of carbon removal brings moral hazard to the fore, raising many difficult political questions. With so many opportunities for mitigation available, can we really justify subsidies for expensive



Geoengineering research could help to educate those who are still dragging their feet on emission reduction. FILE PHOTO: REUTERS

adaptation was a key tenet in a climate policy blueprint issued by President Barack Obama’s Council of Advisers on Science and Technology.

But mitigation and adaptation do not exhaust all the options. Carbon removal specifically breaks the second link in the chain—from emissions to concentrations. Technically, emissions could stay the same, while removal sucks enough carbon out of the atmosphere to decrease concentrations, lessening the net effect and giving rise to many a “net-zero” climate commitment.

That sounds like a win-win. But it turns out to be a rather expensive proposition, especially when looking beyond trees and other “nature-based” solutions. While they remove carbon from the atmosphere, they retain it in the biosphere and are

carbon removal technologies? Moreover, why should big polluters be let off the hook?

That second question goes to the heart of many political debates around climate and economic policy more broadly. Is climate change caused by too much pollution, or is it a problem of economic growth itself? Those who believe it is the latter argue for a full-scale reining in—or rechanneling—of economic activity and market forces; some even call for “degrowth” and other more sweeping societal transformations. Given these associations, it is easy to see why those on the left would be suspicious of carbon removal, and why those on the right might be eager to embrace it.

The political dynamics driving the carbon removal debate are even stronger

in the discussions of solar geoengineering. By reflecting more of the Sun’s radiation, this potential intervention aims to break the link between atmospheric CO2 and rising temperatures. It would not address ocean acidification and other problems directly tied to higher atmospheric concentrations, but it could have its own advantages. Chief among these is that the effects could be virtually immediate, reducing temperatures within months and years, rather than decades and centuries.

Serious discussions of solar geoengineering have long since moved on from the Johnson White House’s ideas about brightening the world’s oceans. The most-discussed method today envisions the seeding of small reflective particles into the lower stratosphere to mimic the global cooling effects of large volcanic eruptions.

Some describe this scale of geoengineering as a “last ditch” option that should be reserved only for a planetary emergency. Others emphasise that it should be viewed only as a potential complement to serious emissions reductions and other interventions—from adaptation to carbon removal—with each addressing climate risks differently.

But again, those who merely argue for more research into solar geoengineering usually meet with strident “moral hazard” objections, as if simply studying the issue will distract from emissions cuts. We must move beyond that argument. Remember, adaptation measures used to be viewed the same way.

Regardless of whether one believes that solar geoengineering is inherently dangerous, potentially useful, or both, one should support more careful, open, and transparent research into the matter. We are not in a position where we can peremptorily reject potential solutions to the climate crisis. If nothing else, geoengineering research could help to educate those who are still dragging their feet on emission reduction.

After all, by failing to break the other links in the climate chain, we are making it more likely that either carbon removal or solar geoengineering will become a key element in the 21st century climate policy portfolio—whether one likes it or not.

Gernot Wagner, clinical associate professor of environmental studies at New York University, is author of “Geoengineering: The Gamble” (Polity, 2021).

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CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

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FRIDAY’S ANSWERS

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