

# THE SOCIAL SCIENCE PERSPECTIVE

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## **GENDER WISE**

### **KAMLA BHASIN – A DEFIANT POWER IN A PETITE FRAME**

I have had no personal interactions with the renowned feminist Kamla Bhasin. Yet, I grieved at hearing the news of her demise on 25 th September. I knew it was inevitable as she was recently diagnosed with an advanced stage of liver cancer. Yet the loss was painful. It was personal.

I grew up reading her books – What is Patriarchy? (1993), Understanding Gender (2000), Exploring Masculinity (2004), and Feminism and its Relevance in South Asia (2004). These have been and continue to be my bible for the courses I teach related to feminism, feminist jurisprudence and feminist strategizing. A former student of mine who plans to get married shortly, asked me for simple books on feminism for his parents to read and understand, and these are what I recommended. I have sung feminist songs written by her (such as my favourite –“Tod TodkeBandhano Ko”) since 1994 when I stepped into the world of feminist activism. I read her re-written nursery songs much after my children grew up!

Her quips, one liners, jokes and her innate and wicked sense of humour were both endearing and memorable. “Don’t fall in love, rise in love!;” “I don’t have a Powerpoint, I have power and that’s the point;” “They demand not just Copper T but property;” “Women’s place is in the house – so it’s a good enough reason for them to be in both Houses of Parliament;” “We believe in the right to copy, not copyright” are a few among innumerable such one liners. The book she authored - Laughing Matters (2004) – contains many such quips. One of the jokes in her book says “We are feminists! We are against ALL HIERARCHY! But yes, sometimes, there is some ANARCHY in our group!” and another - “We wanted to have collective-decision making ... all we achieved was collective paralysis!” These are symbolic of the Indian women’s movements’ capacity to laugh at themselves. My earliest memory of seeing her was at the fourth World Social Forum – the biggest annual event of the anti-globalization movement - held in Mumbai in 2004. I remember her leading us to a “laughter therapy” session, and I thought – she is unlike any other feminist persona I have known! She spoke about why women’s movements was allied with anti-globalization forces, and how the economic globalization had pushed more and more women to the margins, causing social and economic deprivation. A decade later, when I watched her

6

speak to Amir Khan about masculinity in Satyamev Jayate (Season 3, Episode 6, 2014), I was amazed at her clarity of thought and her articulation in simple words, that patriarchy hurt men and boys through its construction of masculinity.

She defied many myths about feminists by just being herself – myths about feminists being man-haters, anti-family and anti-children; feminists being too serious and not laughing or enjoying themselves, and feminists being hierarchical and not interacting with the younger generations from a position of equality. She married, had children, continued to work and

care for her family, and has inspired generations of young people, particularly but not limited to young women by singing, dancing, laughing, talking and writing. I don't look at her work uncritically. Her construction of feminisms in gender binaries long after LGBTQIA+ rights' discourse entered the public domain in India, left me uncomfortable and distraught. Her emphasis on breasts and uterus left many transwomen and gender non-binary feel excluded at a time when inclusivity is the mantra. But her shortcomings only made her more human, and reminded me that all of us are on the learning curve - forever. I believe that this ought not to eclipse the many significant contributions she made to the women's movements in India and South Asia, by leading Sangat, One Billion Rising and by being the oxygen that she was for South Asian feminisms!



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