

## **'Women are the last colony': Interview with gender activist Kamla Bhasin**

***Chitra Kalyani***

Kamla Bhasin is a gender activist and trainer on gender and patriarchy. She has worked for the women's movement for over 40 years. She is also the co-founder of JAGORI, a capacity-building initiative, and is advisor to South Asian feminist network, Sangat. As part of Sangat, Bhasin is the regional coordinator of One Billion Rising. Held on February 14, One Billion Rising celebrates love and uses dance as a medium to campaign for justice and an end to violence against women. In 2013, the first year, 207 countries participated in One Billion Rising with the slogan "Strike. Dance. Rise!" We spoke to Bhasin in the lead up to the second year of One Billion Rising.

### **Tell us about One Billion Rising.**

There are seven billion people in the world; half of them women. The UN says that out of every three women, one is violated; that means over a billion are violated. So the campaign "One Billion Rising" was started by V-Day, an organization based in New York, run by Eve Ensler, the writer of *Vagina Monologues*. So 'V' is for vagina, 'V' is for Victory, 'V' is for Valentine's – all kinds of things. V-Day has been working on violence for the last 10 to 11 years. In 2012, they thought to get a billion people to rise, not just women, but also men and children who love and respect women, and want women to be on this planet.

### **You are also part of another ongoing global campaign "PeaceWomen Across the Globe"?**

I was involved from 2003 to 2005 in a global campaign called "A Thousand Women for the Nobel Peace Prize 2005." Before 2003, women had been given Nobel Peace Prize only nine percent of the time. And we believe that women do a little more than nine percent for peace. A woman was given the Nobel Peace Prize for the first time in 1905, and that was Bertha von Suttner from Austria. So for the 100th anniversary of her award, we thought the Nobel award should be given to a thousand women, together. We took the task to find the 1000 women by 2005.

First of all, we redefined peace. Peace for us is not just the absence of war; peace is comprehensive human security. People working for good health are peace activists. Other topics are removal of poverty, education, justice for people, identity – so if you are working for minority rights, rights of gay people, rights of disabled people, you are working for peace. We made 10 categories. We made criteria and asked people to nominate women from their communities and countries. We selected 1000 out of 3000 nominations from 152 countries. There they are, in the book, *1000 PeaceWomen Across the Globe*.

I coordinated this event in South Asia, from which there are 157 PeaceWomen. It's the largest group from anywhere in the WORLD: partly because there are a lot of problems here, and partly because there is a lot of work here. Now we're a global organization called Peace Women Across the Globe (PWAG) and I'm one of the two global chairpersons. The other is a Swiss socialist woman who lives in Bern. I go there once a year and work with her.

### **How did you get involved in One Billion Rising?**

I met Eve in 2004 while I was working with PWAG. She called me a year and a half ago and asked if I would co-ordinate One Billion Rising in South Asia. I asked for a day to think. The next day we talked again, and I told her I had two conditions. The first condition was there will be no branding – we don't want to do

this with the name of V-Day. We have been working on violence for a while. V-Day came 10 years ago; I've been doing this for 40 years. The women's movement is much older, much larger and much bigger.

The second thing was that it should be democratic and decentralised. Others will not decide for us sitting in New York. I will not decide for South Asia sitting in New Delhi, and Dhaka will not decide for Bangladesh. And we will not do what you are doing. We will do what is best for us, and what will take us forward. We work on our own issues and issues can be different. In Africa the issue might be genital mutilation; here it is dowry. A lot of issues are common – rape is common, domestic violence is common, pornography is common.

We agreed on these conditions and I started calling my contacts and coordinating.

### **Why were you against branding?**

I'm against brands; they create problems. I'm doing this for India. One Billion Rising is everybody's movement; it belongs to the women's movement, it belongs to the global movement against patriarchy. So in South Asia it should not be in my organization Sangat's name because Sangat is co-coordinating it. It's yours, own it. Everybody should own it.

V-Day also has concepts like Vagina Warriors, which I don't like. I like the word 'lover' more than 'warrior.' So we do not have to identify with everything they do, and we don't have to defend them. Similarly we don't have to say it's by Sangat and then defend Sangat.

In South Asia, many organizations work for violence against women. When I work alone, or in Sangat, I feel like a drop of water. When I join a global campaign, I feel like the ocean: one billion people rising. If you go to the ocean, will the rivers enter the ocean with their placards of Ganga or Jamuna? No, they become the ocean. And the ocean is not V-Day or Sangat; the ocean is the women's movement.

There is no doubt V-Day has helped us. Every big campaign helps us to deepen and broaden our contacts, our networks, and infuses new energy, with new posters and new slogans. Last year, so many youngsters joined One Billion Rising with flash mob, and people with disabilities joined us dancing on their wheelchairs.

### **You identify yourself first as a South Asian national. Why is that?**

EIAV8N1P01-1.jpg I have been working for 37 years at the South Asian level; I don't work in India much. My main work is in South Asia, for South Asian solidarity, cooperation, and I call myself a regional of South Asia before I say I am an Indian national. I say that because I believe that unless we have peace in South Asia there can be no development. [Insert pic 1, caption: Courtesy Sangat, South Asia]

### **How did you start off your career?**

I worked in Rajasthan with an NGO from 1972 to 1975, for four years. That was 47 years ago when I started. Then for 27 years, I worked with the UN. I did not work with governments; mine was a tiny capacity building organization for work in Asia—at that time it was all of Asia. I resigned from the UN in 2002, and for the last 11 years, I worked with Sangat.

### **Tell us about Sangat.**

Sangat is a South Asian feminist network. Feminists for us can be women and men. Our main work is capacity building, networking and movement building. We're a tiny organization of three people. We're not even registered, we're hosted by JAGORI, a feminist organization in Delhi. I'm one of the founders of JAGORI which started 30 years ago. Eleven years ago, my friend Abha bhaiya and I started the Delhi JAGORI, along with five others. Then we started JAGORI in Himanchal - JAGORI Grameen or JAGORI Rural Charitable Trust, with which we worked in over a 100 villages.

So Dhiviya Singh, my colleague, is now the official co-coordinator, and I work there part-time. I do the same work in my other time: giving lectures and trainings for men on gender and patriarchy. The men I train are police officers, administrative officers, Indian Administrative Service officers, politicians, heads of NGOs. Yesterday I gave two trainings for a total of 265 auto-rickshaw drivers in Delhi. I also go to colleges to train senior-level administrative officers from different departments.

### **How would you evaluate the status of women today?**

UNDP has calculated the economic value of women's household work, which is unpaid. If it was to be paid at a minimum wage, the UN found that it would be 11 trillion dollars annually. When you ask a husband what his wife does, he says, "Oh, she doesn't do anything. She's just a housewife." That "just a housewife" contributes 11 trillion dollars to the global economy, and it is on her work that the employee, the corporate leader, and the prime minister can get to work on time.

And I thrive and sit here and do this on my help Sujatha's cheap labour. This whole world is running on the cheap labour of women—either as maid-servants or as wives. Men benefit.

Women are the last colony. Other colonies have been liberated. A colony is a person or place whose resources you exploit, whose cheap labour you exploit. So our colonizer, our families, exploit our labour, exploit our sex, exploit our reproductive power, everything.

Women are treated like property. In Christian marriages, the father of the bride gives away the bride to the bridegroom. In Hindu marriages, there is 'kanyadaan' (a donation). You can't do 'daan' of citizens, of women above 18. We cannot be owned under the Indian constitution. So, don't talk of equality, don't confuse girls. Don't tell us in your constitution that we are equal, and then have 'kanyadaan' and 'pati', and when at every step I'm told, "You're just a woman."

We call husbands "pati devta" (husband-god). 'Pati' means 'master'—'swami' in Bangla. 'Husband' means controller, manager, owner; the term 'animal husbandry' comes from there. Society doesn't expect men to be partners; there is no word for partners.

### **You say that patriarchy dehumanizes men. How is that?**

We talk a lot about how patriarchy has harmed women. There's no denying patriarchy really harms us, and it provides material benefits to men. But just see the dehumanization of men in patriarchy. They have no relationship with their emotions; they're not allowed to cry, not allowed to remain gentle. They're born beautiful; all of us are born beautiful. We're born as human beings—we turn them into nasty, masculine, aggressive, dominating men. In spite of all this socialization, some of them escape and become beautiful human beings, but society tries its best not to allow them to be gentle, caring, loving or non-violent.

If I don't like you or if I hate you, I don't even want to touch you. But Hindu, right-wing men who hate Muslim women and rape them, use their own penis to violate a woman whom they hate. So what is their relationship with their body? That night, will that man go back home and will he sleep with that same penis with his wife or a girlfriend? Will he use it for producing his own children? What is his relationship with his progeny? He leaves his child in the womb of a Muslim woman; American soldiers leave it in Afghanistan; they've left it in Vietnam. These men have no relationship with their emotions, with their body, with their children.

Forty percent of Indian men beat their wives. What are they—are they human? A man who can beat his woman, or a child, is dehumanized. He has lost it; he needs to be taken to a hospital.

### **So why identify reform as a "women's movement" and not a "human movement"?**

The women's movement is fighting against patriarchy, but a women's movement includes men. We have a working class movement—trade unions—but there are also middle class people supporting it. There is a Dalit movement. There is a gay movement—you may not be gay, but you support it. If it's a black people's movement, many white people have supported it; blacks are violated because of their colour. Men are also violated, Dalits are violated, but not because of their gender, because of their caste.

We're not fighting on class directly, we're not fighting caste. In that sense it is the women's movement because we are the ones—the 30 percent of us—that are violated because of our gender, because of our sex. Calling it a "women's movement" tells you that we are fighting for equality between men and women, but it's inclusive. There are links between class and gender, caste and gender, race and gender, so they're all interconnected. Class, caste, race—they couldn't have continued without patriarchy. You need patriarchy to keep caste purity. You need to control women's sexuality, you need to control her reproduction if you want that Brahmins should remain Brahmins. Similarly, if you want your property to stay within, then you have to control your women. So these are inter-linked and we understand that.

### **What challenges does the women's movement face today?**

If it was only religious patriarchy or traditional patriarchy, we might have fought it by now, but today the capitalist patriarchy is strengthening patriarchy. Pornography is a billion dollar industry promoting patriarchy and masculinity. Cosmetics is a billion dollar industry that keeps telling me that my beauty has nothing to do with my inside; it's to do with my make-up and my Barbie like body, with breast surgeries, and fat surgeries and anorexia. Barbie doll is a million dollar industry, guns for boys is a million dollar industry. Sports which promotes masculinity most of the time is a billion dollar industry. And patriarchy is coming out of our televisions 24/7 on 300 channels. So the corporate world—the corporate media—are the biggest promoters of patriarchy today. They'll do an article on One Billion Rising, but there will be 25 other ads negating what One Billion Rising is saying, so we won't even be one percent of the media that is anti-patriarchy.

For more information and events regarding One Billion Rising, visit [onebillionrising.org](http://onebillionrising.org) and the Facebook pages for OneBillionRising - South Asia and OneBillionRising - India.

There is also a petition by One Billion Rising on [Change.org](http://Change.org) calling on people to Rise for Justice.

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**Footnote text for first page]** Chitra Kalyani is a freelance journalist based in New Delhi, India. She writes about arts, culture, and gender issues.