

Kamla Bhasin is not Just a Name but an Ideology

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On 25 September 2021, as usual, I woke up in the morning to find the saddening news in my phone that a real star had left Indian soil to be permanently in the sky. She was our beloved Kamala Bhasin. I was doing my regular routine, but I felt a sign of pathos deep inside my heart. I could not overcome that problem even the next day. I started thinking, why do I have this feeling? She was neither my relative nor my friend. I do not know her in person, and I never talked to her. So then, why am I having the feeling of loss and mourning? As I always do in such cases to stop the waves of the mind, I started writing to clear my feeling of loss from my heart. As soon as I started writing, I realised that she was really someone very close to my heart as she was close to millions of girls and women in India as well as in South Asia. She was exactly not just a person, instead she epitomised a particular lifeview—an ideology. She observed, understood and protested not only against gender inequality, she also raised her voice to a high pitch against all kinds of injustice practised and has persisted over generations in our societies. When high intellect, infinite courage and a generous, beautiful heart meet, women like Kamla Bhasin come in being. In this writing, I will not narrate her contribution to Indian society in many different ways. I am pretty sure the future generation of various academic disciplines will research her life and work. I just want to share my own feeling about this great soul. I would like to introduce her to hundreds of women and students of my network who may have never heard her name.

I never heard her name before the 2002, Indian Association for Women's Studies (IAWS) conference. I did not know about her because of

my peripheral location in academia in general and gender studies in particular. IAWS conference is a massive event of gender studies and action in India, where academics, researchers, and activists join to talk to each other and exchange each other's views. Almost all eminent gender studies experts from different universities and institutes of India came to that conference. However, Kamlaji drew my attention from the very first time I saw her there. Unknowingly, I started following her actions during the conference. She has a great power of attraction. Her personality moved me, and since then, I have been a keen follower of her talk, writings and actions. I used to attend IAWS bi-annual conferences regularly, and I used to observe her. I never tried to talk to her, never took a photo with her. However, I am deeply impacted by her philosophy of life.

In that very conference of Bhubaneswar, one eminent activist from Orissa brought with her a group of tribal women fighting for their land and livelihood rights. As always happens, marginal people try to find margins in all kinds of platform—they were loitering here and there in the campus away from the 'bright light' of the academia. Kamlaji brought them to the centre of the audience and tried to make them comfortable with the situation. These are pretty subtle things of life but display deep love and respect for others, the women living on the edge. She always ran from one part of the country to others to engage with the protests, fights, and support the downtrodden and oppressed people. The Bollywood actor, Amir Khan, in his series, *Satyameva Jayate*, brought her in on 17 June 2012 for the *Domestic Violence episode*

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q91lBm9uAjM>) and again on 01 July 2016, *When Masculinity Harms Men* (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NmdAXg1>

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UyOI). I loved her gesture and the ways she delivered the lesson of feminism to Amir Khan. The link to the youtube channels has been shared here. She was indeed the source of light to millions of women in South Asia.

As per my understanding, she believed that feminism could not progress far if we just think about women's oppression and keep silent when other injustices occur. One day in the 2002 IAWS conference, she declared during lunchtime 'we shall make a march today from this campus to Bhubaneswar city centre in the protest of state-aided violence in Gujarat in the afternoon'. Probably, not everyone was happy with that idea as it was not a feminist issue, but she did not care. She knew that even if no other person joined, she would walk on her own. That was the spirit of Kamal Bhasinji. But, we all started walking with her and joined her famous song and slogan of *Azadi* (freedom), which has become a popular voice of young Indians afterwards. She could spend her life as a high-brow academic, but she opted to work for the mass. That does not mean that her academic contribution to Indian feminism is less. No book can be written on Indian feminism without a chapter by or on her.

In all IAWS conferences, I have seen her keep a small *dafli* (tambourine) in her bag. In between lectures or during the break, she used to take out her *dafli* and used to start either singing or sloganeering. Probably she was careful on the issue that the IAWS conference does not turn into another academic conference. She and her fellow colleagues have designed this conference very carefully as a melting pot of both academics and activists where both groups can learn from each other. Her impact on my worldview was very high; unmindfully, I started following her. When I was Gender Chair in Paris Sorbonne University in 2016, one of my lecture titles was Indian *Feminism and Feminist Movements:*

Indigenous Roots and Western Influence. The coordinator of my lecture asked me to give pictures of Indian feminists to make the lecture poster. I gave her a photo for that poster. I am adding that poster here (Figure 1 in the next page).

As I felt, probably she was trying to impart the message to us, the feminist academics of India, 'come on girls, you cannot change the lives of oppressed women in this country just by writing books and papers; you need to go beyond that.' It might be just my personal feeling, but I felt and internalised this unspoken message from her action. A few days before, I posted a feminist news article on 'increased domestic violence even among working women in India' in my FB page, and one friend of mine was arguing on the ground of the authenticity of the data. After a series of arguments, I told her that I do not care about peer-reviewing articles, I am engaged with underprivileged women for my own research over two decades, and I believe that what data represents in such cases is actually the tip of the iceberg. My friend was disappointed with my academic identity, and I replied, 'I do not want to die as an academic; my mission in life is more than that.' So here is the impact of my mother and Kamal Bhasin on my life. I have grown up seeing my mother fight for girls' secondary education in my remote village with the village headman, and in my later life, if anybody has influenced my worldview on women, she is Kamala Bhasin. I hope my Geography and Women's Studies students will read this piece and follow her work. I reiterate again that no feminist reading is possible in India without her. There she is so special to us, all common women in India. I am not writing Rest in Peace as I know your body can die, but your soul can never rest in peace as long as women in this country cry for rights and justice. Long live Kamla Bhasin!

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Universit  de Burdwan (Inde) &
Chaire « Genre et  galit  » de Sorbonne Paris Cit 
Feminism and Feminist Movements in India:
Indigenous roots and Western influences.



Vina Mazumdar (anokhimedia.com)



Kamla Bhasin (feministsindia.com)

Jeudi 17 mars 2016 17h   19h
1er  tage, Salle 103

Responsables : Bernard Thomann et Claire Tr n Thi Li n
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Figure 1: Poster of My Presentation