Transcending borders and boundaries

Kamla Bhasin’s genius lay in her ability to work past different fault lines and build diverse coalitions.

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The domains of peacebuilding and protest are ordinarily seen as opposing separate and discrete worlds. Yet in the women’s movements in South Asia, beginning with the 1980s but more visibly in the 1990s, these became increasingly intertwined as scholars and activists forged synergies and cross-border solidarities.

Feminist icon Kamla Bhasin, who passed away in September, contributed to this demouvement. She invested her unique energy towards transcending borders and boundaries, past monocultures of the mind that reinforce stereotypes, mistrust and militarism, and reflect the cartographic anxieties of nation states.

Bhasin famously said, “Main sarhad par khadi deewar nahi, us deewar par padi daraar hoon [I am not the wall that stands at the border, I am the crack in that wall]”. This captured the spirit with which women conflict “resolutionaries” in South Asia, often in the face of stiff opposition, bricolaged around cordons of territoriality to join forces and mobilise across fault lines of country, caste, religion, class and gender.

The recognition that women across South Asia face a continuum of violence – both structural and overt – as they confront the patriarchies of the family, the community, and the state, and “the complexities between them”, sustained networks unfettered by national identities.

Bhasin’s book with Ritu Menon, Borders and Boundaries, and Urvasi Butalia’s The Other Side of Silence, both published in the 1990s, were path-breaking in their accounts of the narratives of pain, loss, displacement and violence that the Partition of India had wrought on women on both sides of the border and the similarity of their experiences. These works revealed how community and even national honour were inscribed on the bodies of women and the gendered nature of citizenship. It triggered explorations around what country, religious identity or even nation really meant for women. It also opened the space for research and activism that interrogated the “sanctity of borders”.

**Singular experiences**

Several ethnographic narratives that gave voice to the singular experiences of women in situations of conflict – in Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Afghanistan and Pakistan – added to the repertoire, enabling civil society transversal engagements across South Asia around the issues of justice, rights, patriarchy, militarisation and nuclearisation. Through periods of adversarial face-offs between different Governments and their neighbours – especially between India and Pakistan – feminists like Bhasin were hard at work to ensure that people-to-people contact and a form of public diplomacy sustained dialogue and nurtured synergies.

With women in the lead, initiatives like the Women’s Action Forum (WAF) in Pakistan that reached out to their sisters in Bangladesh to apologise for the atrocities of the Pakistan army in 1971; the Women’s Peace Bus undertaken by the Women’s Initiative for Peace in South Asia (WIPSA) from Delhi to Lahore in 2000 to demand a war-free South Asia; Women in Security Conflict Management and Peace (WISCOMP) bringing young South Asians together in workshops on conflict transformation; and Sangat with its innovative regional gender training conclaves, to name a few, persevered with the mission to expand constituencies for peace.

In recent decades, South Asia has been witness to collectives of “disobedient women” articulating peace and defying state-centric notions of security and order. They have been visible in the mother’s movements in Sri Lanka, the Thappa Force in the “Malki ya Maaut [ownership or death]” farmers struggle in Pakistan, and in the Chipko, Narmada, Bhopal and Kankalanim movements in India. Demonstrations like the Meira Paibis (women with torches) in Manipur, and the congregation of women at Shaheen Bagh and at the farmers’ protests are also part of these traditions of dissent.

Drawing from the experience of activists like Bhasin of making a woman’s place “in the resistance”, these movements have largely entered the peacebuilding arena through the corridors of human security – voicing democracy and reclaiming citizenship.

**Core of their engagement**

Highlighting the tensions between people’s security and what often passes as national security, opposition to war and the cultures of militarism have been at the core of their engagement. Foregrounded is also the need to link issues of peace and security to development in order to address the structural causes of conflict. Feminist scholars have often made the connections between the formal security discourse and certain types of hegemonic masculinity, and how policy priorities and (techno) strategic discourse are skewed to preserve power hierarchies nationally, within the international system and the world economic order.

Women’s movements have interrogated the conventional peace metaphor of the figure in white, passive/ly holy or wholly passive. To “wage conflict non-violently”, transgressing received notions of security, in their everyday resistances against injustice and oppressive socio-political institutions in order to build structural peace, has been their clarion call.

The feminist “weapons” they bring to their engagement blend the cerebral, the celebratory and the performative. Bhasin herself, with her extraordinary communication skills, drew in large numbers of young enthusiasts, “deploying” slogans and art, music and humour, making her succinct, accessible primers on gender, patriarchy and peace resonate across groups, while unpacking the most complex of feminist concepts. These forms of protest and peace praxis draw from the global palimpsest of feminist activism chiselled by women the world over.

Feminist peace activists today recognise that the search for common ground involves acknowledging differences, while building on commonalities. Women’s experiences of conflict and violence are mediated by their “location” and the intersectionality of caste, class, region, religion and gender. Bhasin’s genius lay in her ability to work past these different fault lines and build diverse coalitions and communities of practice.

Since the mid-1980s, South Asian women activists have sought to “engage” peace by drawing in larger numbers even from perceived “hostile” neighbourhoods into safe “disarmed”, empathetic spaces of trust.

This was well before the landmark United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSC) 1325 in 2000 had set the global normative template of the Women Peace and Security (WPS) Agenda. Did South Asian feminist peace activism then offer crucial conceptual alphabets for the international template on positive peace (peace with justice) as an inclusive public process, and not just “brokering” in closed negotiations only by men? The story of their seminal contributions to the WPS discourse needs to become more visible.

A people’s peace is a perpetual work-in-progress. It also an invitation to civil society to continuously fine-tune the song of democracy. Nurturing a South Asian identity was Bhasin’s labour of love. With love, she strove to inscribe it into the lives of others. And she did it, as we all must, with “passion, compassion, humour and style.”

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