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Democracy as a System of Governance and as a Feminist Vision

by Kamla Bhasin

My feminist salaams to you and to all our FOREMOTHERS, who struggled for hundreds of years to get us where we are today.

I was here in 1985 for the international women's conference, an amazingly energising experience! I was also here two years ago, in a meeting of a women's group in a working class area of Mombasa. We all had to introduce ourselves, and every time a woman started speaking, she said, "Wakina Mama Hai!" The whole group answered with energy, "Hai!" I asked what they were saying. I was told that every time a woman spoke, she asked, "Are you women with me?" "Are you listening?" And they said, "Yes, we are with you!"

That was a preparation for a genuine dialogue — based on listening, deep communication, and communion where we open our hearts and speak with honesty.

So I ask you friends, "Wakina Mama Hai?" Are you listening with your hearts? Are you open enough to make this Feminist Dialogue a genuine dialogue?

Let me share another story. A leader of an indigenous group was asked, "Tell us, wise one, what are the three most important things in life?" She thought for a long while, then said that the first important thing in life is PEOPLE. Again, she pondered and said, the second important thing is PEOPLE, and the third important thing is also PEOPLE.

Democracy or the rule of people is a system that also believed in people, but from the very beginning the notion of people excluded some categories, e.g., slaves and women. Only propertied

men were considered people. Even today, propertied men control most democracies.

Liberal democracy turned the rule of people into rule by representatives of people. In societies with deep class, caste, race, and gender inequalities, leaders have seldom represented the majority of people or worked for their well-being. Indeed, the elites have ruled to safeguard their own interests and have excluded the majority social classes.

Exclusion has been the NORM, the exclusion of all dominated, exploited, and hated groups. Today, women and dalits, indigenous people in many societies, people of colour, and sexual minorities are still struggling to be recognised as persons with human rights.

You remember that old feminist postcard which said, "Feminism is the Radical Notion that Women Are People." Unfortunately, we still have to repeat this ridiculous notion.

Today, legally, women are considered people in most societies but they are severely under-represented in all decision-making bodies. This under-representation and exclusion, women share with other subordinate groups.

Today, our liberal democracies are not only controlled by local elites, male or female. They are hijacked by global elites from a handful of money-rich countries and corporations, the World Bank, the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

In this forum, we are talking of alternative democracies. Many of us believe alternative democracy is not possible without alternative economics. Feminism has taught us to see the interconnections, flows, and continuums

"Feminists have broadened the notion and practice of politics and democracy"

between the power of politics and the economy.

Many of us here believe that our democracies are undemocratic, precisely because our economic systems are undemocratic. In a manner of speaking, the economic system has been the father, the bully, the ruler, and the lord. Politics is the child, the supporter, the slave, and the lackey.

...an increasing dissatisfaction with liberal democracy, because capitalist market economies have invariably resulted in the concentration of wealth, an increased gap between the rich and the poor, and the exclusion of most people...

Today's economic paradigm or neo-liberalism (which puts market and profit at the center of people's activities) is not only the father of anti-people democracies. It is the father of all wars, of militarisation, of rampant militarisms. It is the father of most fundamentalisms.

According to some, the purpose of the state was to protect private property and the very purpose of liberal democracy was to uphold and reinforce capitalist relations of production and power. Today's neo-liberalism does not believe in economic democracy because this would interfere with the free exercise of rights to private property.

Particularly since the late 1980s, there has been an increasing dissatisfaction with liberal democracy, because capitalist market economies have invariably resulted in the concentration of wealth,

an increased gap between the rich and the poor, and the exclusion of most people from vital economic decisions.

Centralisation of economic power is based on endless greed, leading to endless exploitation of natural resources and people, especially of women.

According to Vandana Shiva¹, the present global economy is a permanent war economy and the means or instruments of this war are coercive free trade treaties and technologies of production based on violence and control, such as toxic, genetic, and nano-technologies.

Vandana Shiva goes on to say that these economic measures are the real "Weapons of Mass Destruction," which kill millions in peace-time by robbing them of food and water, thus poisoning the web of life.

"Globalisation is shaping a world in which bees, biodiversity and peasants are defined as threats inviting 'preemptive strikes' through violent technologies and trade treaties."

"The present global wars are a direct outcome of economic and corporate globalisation; a handful of corporations and a handful of powerful countries seek to control the earth's resources and to transform the planet into a supermarket in which everything is for sale. They want to sell our water, our genes, our cells, our organs, our knowledge, our cultures and our future. Militarisation is the shield for corporate globalisation, both nationally and globally."

"Real democracy is the first principle that corporate globalisation sacrifices. Government gets divorced from their people. Representative

“An economy based on greed and profit alone, is inevitably an economy of death and it creates politics and cultures of death.”—Vandana Shiva



democracy is no longer representative or democratic under pressures of corporate globalisation. The combination of corporate rule and electoral democracy inevitably shifts politics towards fascism, fundamentalism and militarism. An economy based on greed and profit alone, is inevitably an economy of death and it creates politics and cultures of death.”

“The economy of death is based on fear. Fear amongst those who lose their livelihoods, homes, cultures, allowing them to be more easily manipulated by fascists and fundamentalists; and also fear amongst those who set their eyes on the resources and wealth of others. This is the fear which drives the current wars, a fear that supports the economics of death with cultures of violence and the politics of violence and exclusion.”

“If terrorism is the dominant category of our times, negativity is the dominant trend. Negative economies are being supported by negative politics. Inverted states, which create freedom for foreign investors and destroy the freedom of their citizens, corporate states which deregulate corporate activity and over-regulate the everyday life of their citizens. Negative politics is

also expressed in the death of economic democracy and economic nationalism, and in the rise of fundamentalist ideologies, cultural nationalism. Negative economies and politics feed on and fuel negative cultures and identities.”

“Cultures have been shaped by the land, cultural diversity has co-evolved with biological diversity. As identities are displaced and insecurities grow, identity is shaped by insecurity; culture is experienced through the negation of the ‘other’. In these negative cultures and identities, terrorism, extremism and xenophobia take on virulent form. Humanity defines itself through its inhumanity; vicious cycles of violence and exclusion—cultural, political, economic—become the dominant trend.”

“Globalisation is in fact, the replacement of self-determined, self-organised systems with extremely manipulated ones, globally financed and globally organised. Global terrorism and fundamentalism are the inseparable twins of economic globalisation. Politics stops being accountable to the people, the public is treated as the first threat, the potential enemy, a terrorist in the making.”

Ordinary women and men have understood these connections very well. In fact, women like Vandana Shiva have learnt from women and men whose livelihoods have been attacked, whose cultures have been destroyed, whose identities negated, by corporate greed. Poor women in Latin America, Africa, Asia and also in the US and Europe have understood all these and taught people like us.

Feminist Contribution to Democracy

Feminists have broadened the notion and practice of politics and democracy.

We coined the slogan, “The Personal is Political,” and thus, dismantled the artificial walls between the domestic and the public.

We insisted that democracy is not just a tool. It is a culture, a way of thinking, a way of being. Democracy is a value, a principle, a non-negotiable way of relating. Democracy must begin within ourselves, in our families and organisations.

Feminists have tried to practice democracy in our organisations by making non-hierarchical collectives, by trying collective leadership. Sometimes, this may have led to collective paralysis, but we tried.

Feminists have opposed “Bushful” thinking, i.e., using bombs to talk, making greed into a God, making “Othering” legitimate and hating the “Other.”

Feminists have also spoken passionately about the need for Diversity and Inclusion. We have spoken of PLURALISM, which not only tolerates diversity but celebrates it.

Feminists have provided strong ecological perspectives. We have included all living beings and living systems into our notion of democracy. Vandana Shiva, for example, talks of Earth Democracy which involves the reinvention of cultural identity, politics, and the economy.

“Human Rights in our times must focus on the human species to survive in peace with each other and with the rest of the earth family.” Vandana Shiva said, “For the first time we have an opportunity to seek freedom in inclusive ways, in our diversity, to seek freedom for humans in partnership with other species and to seek freedom non-violently. This freedom of diversity is the alternative to globalisation.”

“Earth Democracy is living democracy. Reclaiming the community and the commons is at the heart of building living economies and living democracy. A key element of living democracy is the recognition that the right to vital resources is a natural right. It is not given by the states and it cannot be taken away by corporations through privatisation. As a natural right, the right to life and life’s sustenance is also a common right,” said Vandana Shiva.

I am delighted that the World Social Forum (WSF) has included spirituality as a theme this time. It is sad that we did not talk about spirituality here in the Feminist Dialogues (FD). I think it is important to bring spirituality into our discussions. For me, spirituality means being close to nature, and following its principles. It is understanding our interdependence. In short, I am—because you are.

For me, spirituality means understanding and following the feminine principles of caring, nurturing,

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loving, and compassion. To practice spirituality is to wage a struggle between the negative and positive forces in our mind, in our collective mind. For me, spirituality is the end of Bushful thinking. Spirituality is the bringing together of Economics and Ethics, Science and Morality, Politics and Honesty/Transparency, Yin and Yang, Anima and Animus.

...democracy needs to continue to undergo a process of re-creation and constant experimentation because democracy can never be achieved in any final form.

Such spirituality has to inform and guide our Earth Democracy, a Radical Democracy.

Feminists and Radical Democracy

For us, feminists, radical democracy insists on the literal understanding of democracy as decision-making of and by the people.

It is convinced that such “people democracy” is actually possible and doable.

It believes in equal opportunity for all to take part in decision-making not only in the political realm, but also at the workplace, in religion and cultural communities, in the family, and in all interpersonal relationships.

It encourages people to gain control of their lives.

It tries to create structures and systems which make it possible for citizens to exercise self-determination.

It encourages people to respect the rights of others, to take part in debates about the “common good,” and to create institutions that are truly egalitarian.

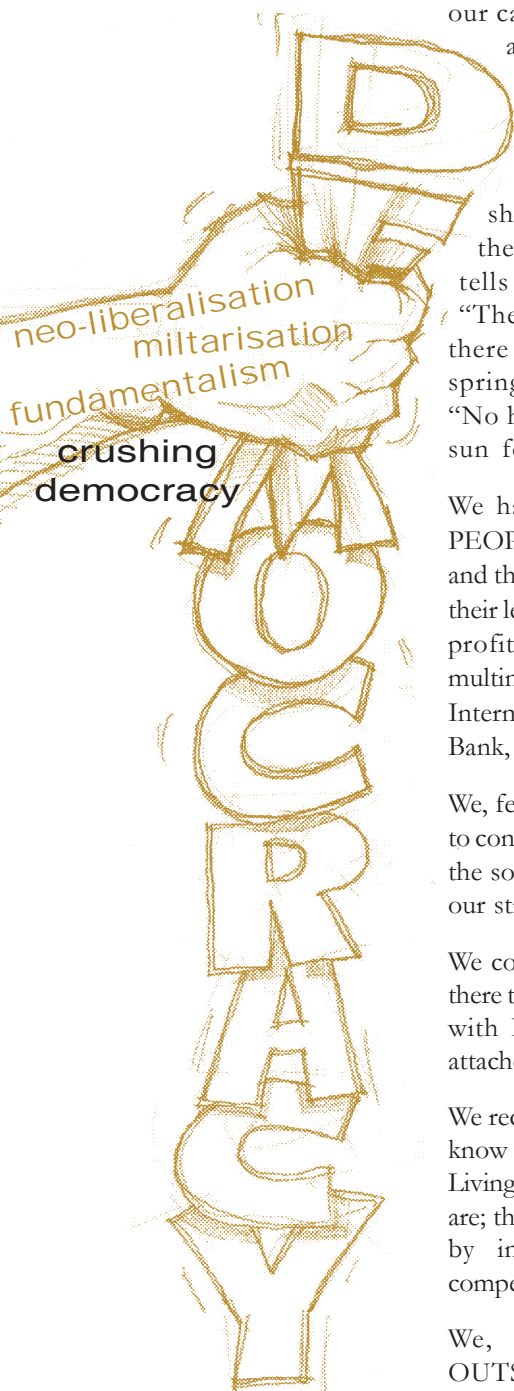
Radical democracy is participatory.

It recognises that democracy needs to continue to undergo a process of re-creation and constant experimentation because democracy can never be achieved in any final form. Democracy has to be continually renegotiated.

“Grassroots movements of women and men are the embodiment of such ongoing democratisation processes. They show the variety of ways in which women struggle for more control over their daily lives, extending opportunities for greater participation and well-being in the future. These groups address practical everyday problems, improve living conditions in particular locations and promote values associated with local, decentralised democracy. They redefine the form and content of politics and democracy by seeking to create and expand spaces for democratic decision-making, consciousness raising, individual self-development, group solidarity, ritual practices and more effective participation in society and religion. Women and men have been at the forefront in creating and shaping such global processes of democratisation.”²

And we will continue to do the same. There is no alternative to grassroots mobilisation. The world will be transformed by the extraordinary wisdom and hard work of ordinary women and men.

I feel that we, as feminists, have to face the following challenges if we wish to



strengthen democratic culture, values, and practices and if we wish to create sustainable livelihoods.

We have to keep our closeness to Mother NATURE, our nurturer, and our carer. We should go to her again and implore her to teach us the principles of being and living; the principles of ecology, of interconnectedness, of diversity, and of harmony. We should go to her because she has the power to heal and nurture. She tells us in Pablo Neruda's words, "They can destroy all the flowers there are, but they cannot stop the spring from coming." She tells us, "No hand is big enough to block the sun forever."

We have to keep connected to our PEOPLE—people who are the means and the end; people who are bigger than their leaders; people who are bigger than profits; people who are bigger than multinational corporations (MNCs), the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the WTO.

We, feminists, also have to go INSIDE, to constantly turn into our inner selves—the source of our energies, from where our strengths ensue.

We constantly turn to our inner selves, there to reconnect with Shakti, with Giae, with Isis, with Tara—sundry names attached to the values we hold dear.

We recurrently turn within once more to know and proclaim that Giving is Living, Living is Giving; that I am, because you are; that independence is complemented by interdependence; that more than competition we need cooperation.

We, feminists, also have to go OUTSIDE—outside our boxes and

disciplines, beyond our egos and selfishness, beyond our little NGOs or our academic empires. We go outside to listen closely.

We go outside to make connections with other movements. We join others to develop common visions and strategies because we know the feminist movement is just another face of the peace movement, of the environment movement, of the right to work and right to food movement. We make rainbow alliances to reach our goals because we realise that bigger goals require bigger networks and alliances.

We, feminists, have to make BRIDGES—between the local and the global, between individual and community, between our separateness and greater oneness, between theory and practice, between short-term and long-term, between parts and whole, between body and mind, between rational and emotional, between nature and culture, between economics and ethics, between science and morality.

We have to be local but also GLOBAL—because unjust globalisation can be challenged only through our global connections and actions. We build global trust, global dreams of better worlds, global solidarity between countries of the South, between people fighting for justice and peace.

We have to continue looking at the world through our own eyes—Women's Eyes. We must persist defining legitimacy—our own legitimacy, the legitimacy of our claims, of our views, of our feminist perspectives and of our goals. We must insist in the legitimacy of our choices and voices, of our dreams.

We must persist in the "Politics of Remembering." We remember our

foremothers and our forefathers, who fought for justice. We remember too, not just our rights but also our obligations.

We remember our achievements but also those tasks which remain to be done. The Politics of Remembering also means we never forget the tragedies of Mina Mata, Bhopal, and Chernobyl. We never forget wars and genocides. We never forget the natural and political tsunamis.

We have to bring younger feminists (women and men) into our movements, because they are our hope and our future. We have to nurture them, help them become strong and gentle, rational and passionate. Slowly, we hand over the movements to them and wish them well.

To show how we will shout, connect, be noticed, let us conclude with a slogan. It is a slogan for freedom—or azaadi—which I learnt many years ago from my sisters in Pakistan.

We women want – *Aazaadi!*

From wars and violence – *Aazaadi!*

From helpless silence – *Aazaadi!*

From rape and plunder – *Aazaadi!*

From nuclear blunder – *Aazaadi!*

From exploitation – *Aazaadi!*

From sexploitation – *Aazaadi!*

From globalisation – *Aazaadi!*

From privatisation – *Aazaadi!*

From colonisation – *Aazaadi!*

From monocultures – *Aazaadi!*

From profit vultures – *Aazaadi!*

From Bushful thinking – *Aazaadi!*

From global sinking – *Aazaadi!*

From patriarchy – *Aazaadi!*

From all hierarchy – *Aazaadi!*

From our seclusion – *Aazaadi!*

From all exclusion – *Aazaadi!* ■



Kamlu Bhasin, a social scientist by training, has been involved with issues related to development, education, gender, and media since 1972 when she joined a voluntary organisation in Rajasthan, India. She has worked with the Food and Agriculture Organisation's (FAO) Freedom From Hunger Campaign/Action for Development, supporting innovative NGO initiatives, organising trainings/workshops and facilitating networking between NGOs, women's organisations and people's organisations in South East and South Asia. Presently, she is the Advisor to South Asian Network of Gender Activities and Trainers (SANGAT), is an active member of JAGORI, Women's Resource and Training Centre, and South Asians for Human Rights (SAHR).

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Endnotes

¹ Vandana Shiva. (2005). *Globalizations New Wars: Seeds, Water and Life Forums*. New Delhi: Women Unlimited.

² These ideas on Radical Democracy are from Elizabeth Shussler Fiorenza.(2004). A Critical Feminist Spirituality of Struggle. In *Waging Peace: Building a World in Which Life Matters* (a Festschrift for Gabriele Dietrich), IWIT/APICK.