

# KAMLA BHASIN AWARDS 2024



Driving Gender Equality  
Across South Asia

NOVEMBER 30, 2024



Azad Foundation



[Kamlabhasinawards.org](http://Kamlabhasinawards.org) |    @kamlabawards

## About the Kamla Bhasin Award

Kamla Bhasin (24 April 1946–25 September 2021) was more than an icon of feminism and social activism; she was a relentless force of change, a vibrant soul who brought light, joy, and energy into every corner she touched. With her bold voice, compelling poetry, and infectious songs, Kamla broke barriers and united people in their quest for justice, equality, and peace. She dedicated her life to amplifying the voices of the marginalized, especially women, empowering them to reclaim their rightful place in society.

Kamla believed that activism was not only about resistance but also about celebration — of diversity, community, and the shared humanity that binds everyone. Her rallies were not merely protests but vibrant gatherings filled with songs, laughter, and hope, reflecting her unique ability to merge passion with purpose. As a poet, writer, and songwriter, she transformed complex issues into accessible messages that inspired generations. Her words and actions resonated far beyond borders, making her a global feminist icon of thought and practice. Kamla reminded the world that equality is not a favor but a right, and justice, a non-negotiable.

Her legacy lives on as a call to action, a reminder to carry forward her dream of a world rooted in dignity, love, and harmony. Kamla Bhasin’s life is not just a story of what person can achieve but a shining example of the power of collective courage, creativity, and unwavering belief in a better tomorrow. This award constituted in the year 2022 by the Azad Foundation is a humble and yet resolute attempt to inspire and recognize the grass-roots organizations and change makers who relentlessly work towards a gender just society.



This award seeks to honour and celebrate the efforts of women, men, and transgender individuals who are actively challenging patriarchy and striving for a gender-just society. It recognizes those who empower women to secure livelihoods with dignity and exercise autonomy over their lives and bodies. Encompassing the South Asian region, the award will include contributions from Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. Since the last three years this award has been planned and conducted successfully with three organizations – Azad Foundation, iPartner India and National Foundation of India coming together and collaborating to seamlessly working in sync.

## The Core Organizers

1. *Azad Foundation*: Azad Foundation is a feminist organisation working across social and religious divides, enabling resource-poor women to empower themselves by engaging in viable non-traditional livelihood options. To read more about the work of Azad, please go to [www.azadfoundation.com](http://www.azadfoundation.com)
2. *iPartner India, UK*: iPartner India, a charity organisation based in United Kingdom, has a vision to create a more gender-just and equitable India – an India where poverty levels have been significantly reduced, and where every person has equal opportunities regardless of gender, caste, or socio-economic background. They come with 17 years of experience and expertise in working closely on the ground directly and in partnership with local NGOs that are transforming

the lives of the underprivileged. To read more about the work of iPartner India, UK please go to – <https://ipartnerindia.org/>

3. **National Foundation for India:** NFI is an organization committed to enabling social justice through civic engagement, responsive policy-making and social accountability. Towards promoting social justice, NFI has been working with over 500 grassroots civil society organisations in 14 states over the past three decades. Currently NFI works with Dalit, Adivasi and Minority communities across its program verticals of climate change, gender justice, civic space and promotion of constitutional values. To read more about the work of NFI, please go to- <https://www.nfi.org.in/>

### Meet the Jury Members of 2024 Kamla Bhasin Awards

Like every year, the jury members were from different South Asian countries like India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and Nepal.



**Anu Aga (India):** Anu Aga is a social worker by training. The Thermax Board appointed Anu as the Executive Chairperson. After retiring, she devoted her time to primary education for the economically underprivileged. She has been on the board of Akansha for over 2 decades and helped launch Teach for India (TFI). She retired as Chairperson of TFI and is still on their board. Anu has been active in the Confederation of Indian Industry (CII). She served for 6 years as a member for the Rajya Sabha.



**Khushi Kabir (Bangladesh):** Khushi Kabir is a social activist, feminist and environmentalist. She is currently the coordinator of Nijera Kori. She is also involved in an honorary capacity in various national, regional and global forums such as Member, Board Trustees of the Centre for Policy Dialogue; Regional Advisor for Sangat; and Bangladesh Coordinator for the One Billion Rising global campaign.



**Namita Bhandare (India):** Namita Bhandare is an award-winning journalist with 30 years of reporting experience for various publications including the magazines Sunday, India Today, and the daily Hindustan Times. In 2013, she was appointed India's first gender editor for Mint newspaper and was there until 2016. She has authored a series of articles on women and work.



**Binda Pandey (Nepal):** Binda Pandey is a Nepalese Political activist. A former member of the Federal Parliament, representing the Communist Party of Nepal, she was also a member of the 1st Nepalese Constituent Assembly (2008). Binda has served as Deputy General Secretary of the General Federation of Nepalese Trade Unions during 2004–2009. She represented the Asia Pacific trade union in the ILO Governing Body for a decade (2011-2021). She has written books on “Women Participation in Nepalese Trade Union Movement” and “Women in Nepali Politics”



**Munizae Jahangir (Pakistan):** Munizae Jahangir is the editor in chief of Voicepk.net, Pakistan’s first digital media platform focusing on human rights issues. She is an award-winning TV journalist and documentary filmmaker, currently anchoring a prime-time current affairs show called ‘Spotlight’ on Aaj TV. She is an elected council member of Human Rights Commission of Pakistan; an elected Board member of SAHR (South Asians for Human rights) and the founder of SAWM (South Asian Women in Media) She was honoured as Young Global Leader by WEF in 2008.



**Radhika Coomaraswamy (Sri Lanka):** Radhika Coomaraswamy is a renowned lawyer, diplomat and human rights advocate who served as UN Under Secretary General and as Special Representative of the Secretary General on Children and Armed Conflict from 2006 until her retirement in 2012. From 1994 to 2003, she was the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence against Women. In 2017 she was appointed to the UN Fact Finding Mission on Myanmar and also appointed as a member of The Secretary General’s Board of Advisors on Mediation. In June 2022, she was appointed as a Member of the International Commission of Human Rights Experts in Ethiopia.

The planning and process of executing the award began well in advance in the month of February 2024. Some important timelines related to the main award were:

Timeline	Milestones
March 8, 2024	Opening of the application process
June 30, 2024	Closing of application process
July-August, 2024	Shortlisting and interview of candidate
September, 2024	Announcement of the Winners
October, 2024	Decision made by the Jury on the final awardees
November 30, 2024	Award Ceremony in New Delhi

A collaborative decision was made to have the award function on the 30<sup>th</sup> of November at the Stein auditorium, India Habitat Center which coincided with the South Asian Women's Day.

**Selection Criterion:** The selection criterion for the award is in two categories:

#### **Category 1**

- Practicing a non-traditional livelihood in her/their context for the last 3 years
- Empowered herself/themselves to gain control over not just her/their earnings, but also her/their life Is a change agent and created opportunities for others

Non-traditional livelihoods are those which break the glass or rather a concrete ceiling and walls put around the women and transwomen by virtue of belonging to a certain caste, community, religious group, or because of their sexual orientation, their gender identity, disability, their habitat, and this list can be long, and varied depending upon the discrimination structures that exist in any society. Gender norms around unpaid work and mobility for example have been one of the reasons for women and transwomen not being allowed to take on occupations such as driving or masonry which requires them to be away from home for a large part of the day and also night. You can read more about non-traditional livelihoods and some examples from around the region by clicking [here](#).

#### **Category 2**

- Working with men/boys towards a gender-just world in the last 5 years
- Countering harmful masculinity in personal and work life by contributing in care work, accepting women's leadership, combating all forms of gender-based violence and gendered socio-cultural norms
- Is a change agent and influenced other men to enable gender just world

Engaging boys and men in promoting gender equality is in tandem with Kamla's slogan, "Men of Quality are not afraid of Equality." This category highlights the importance of men challenging patriarchal norms. This category aims to recognize such men or transmen who have examined patriarchal practices in their lives, acknowledge their privileges, and recognize the constraints of patriarchy. We seek men or transmen who actively work with other males to confront harmful practices, oppose violence against women and sexual minorities, share responsibility for domestic care work, and support women and transgender individuals in claiming their rights. Our goal is to cultivate supportive environments for these change agents to learn from each other and inspire others to advocate for gender equality.

The entries were accepted in all the South Asian language and this year, 90 applications were received from across South Asia, with 68 applications in Category 1 and 22 applications in Category 2. In a video message shared by the Jury Chair, Radhika Coomaraswamy during the award ceremony, the applications came from a wide range of grassroots organizations and groups like trade unionists, activists etc. working in diverse areas related to Gender Equality and given the strength of the applications and their extraordinary quality, two special awards, one in each category from Jury members were decided and given.

## Kamla Bhasin Awardees 2024

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### WINNERS

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#### **Lalitha Ranjani (Sri Lanka)**

*Winner, Category 1*

A Woman Practitioner of Non-Traditional Livelihood



Lalitha has been a trade union activist since 1998 and one of the first generation of women garment workers in Sri Lanka who joined the garment sector in the early 1990s. She could not complete her education owing to poverty. After joining the trade union as a full-time organiser, she steadily rose through the ladder to become the National Coordinator for the free trade zones and the treasurer of the union. She is a founder member and the current Chief Organizer of Textile, Garment and Clothing Workers Union (TGCWU), which is a women led trade union for garment workers. TGCWU is the first women-led trade union in Sri Lanka and it is also one of the few trade unions supporting female workers in the garment sector. Under her leadership, the union has grown to more than 1500 workers and fostered strong women leadership in the garment factories, outside of the urban industrial zones. Her vision is to elevate the union's presence to the national level and represent garment sector workers in the labour policy making forums. She also wants to build a federation of textile trade unions to strengthen the bargaining power of garment sector workers.

**Sunil Mohan R (India)**

*Winner, Category 2*

A Trans-Man Working Towards Enabling a Gender-Just Ecosystem



Sunil Mohan, a trans man and former Kerala women's cricket team captain, has spent over two decades challenging patriarchal norms and promoting gender equity in Bangalore. He is a facilitator, an ethnographic researcher, an activist, a thinker and a writer who has been engaging with issues of queerness, gender expression fluidity, masculinity, caste and marginalization. Through his body of work, he has made visible the issues of trans men and trans masculine communities and nuanced the understanding of masculinities through the lenses of power, marginalization and intersectionality. At the age of 20, he left his home in Kerala having faced violence within his native family and found acceptance and care with a transwoman and her community in Bengaluru. Having lived as a gender queer person all his life, he struggled to find a language for his own dilemmas, questions and experiences. His own struggles led him to expand the counters of gender expressions, beyond the frameworks of identities, contribute to bringing a greater understanding around gender, identities like caste and weave them with the fabric of everyday politics. Through legal policy engagement, crisis intervention, and community-based research, he has impacted over 3,000 individuals. Sunil envisions reshaping historical narratives and establishing a queer café in Bangalore to build space for an open dialogue and creative expression around trans experiences.

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## SPECIAL JURY AWARDS

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### **Jaya Chakma (Bangladesh)**

*Special Jury Awardee, Category 1*

A Woman Practitioner of Non-Traditional Livelihood



Jaya is a trailblazer as Bangladesh’s first woman football referee (FIFA accredited), a role that is considered not as a traditional source of livelihood for women in Bangladesh, especially for someone belonging to minority Chakma Tribe and Buddhist community. At the age of 11 she started playing football with boys in her village – Rangamati in Bangladesh. She represented Bangladesh in the national team from 2008 to 2012. She received FIFA accreditation in 2020, becoming the first and the only woman FIFA-accredited referee in the country. Alongside her refereeing career, she has been a full-time employee at Bangladesh Krira Shikha Protishthan (BKSP), the nation’s premier sports institution, as a football coach. She has led the Under-16 girls' team, to win the Subroto Cup three consecutive times (2017, 2018, and 2019), earning the best coach award each year. She has trained around 300 girls and woman in football and refereeing. Her vision for the upcoming years is to create a more inclusive and equitable environment in the world of football, where women, especially from minority backgrounds, are empowered to pursue their dreams and contribute meaningfully to the sport.



## **Nikhil Taneja (India)**

Special Jury Awardee, *Category 2*

A Male Working Towards Enabling a Gender-Just Ecosystem



Nikhil Taneja is a Mumbai-based writer, producer, mental health and gender equity advocate and the co-founder and CEO of Yuva, a purpose-driven youth media, research and impact organisation working to create socially conscious content and starting meaningful conversations among and about Indian youth, particularly on mental health and gender. He has travelled with Yuva to over 40 Indian cities and over 150 colleges and universities in India to create a safe space for over 15000 young Indians. On these road shows he heard several hundred young men talk about loneliness and a lack of a support system in their lives. This also led him to create and host a chat series titled “Be A Man, Yaar,” a video chat show on positive masculinity that features prominent Indian men in open, authentic discussions about boyhood, manhood, and humanity, aimed at helping young boys feel less alone. The show has reached over 150 million viewers, with 8 million trailer views, and gained 500+ mentions from celebrities and 200+ organic media mentions.

### **A Prelude to the Event – Learning Journeys**

The awardees of the Kamla Bhasin Award began arriving at the venue starting November 26. As a prelude to the main event, Azad Foundation organized a thoughtfully curated learning journey for the awardees. Each participant was paired with a core member of Azad Foundation’s leadership team to engage in activities that included interactions with women trainees from Azad’s Women with Wheels program and members of the Men for Gender Justice initiative, as well as visits to Azad’s field and center locations in

Delhi. The goal was to create a shared experience that would foster learning and mutual inspiration between the awardees and the individuals involved in Azad's initiatives.

### Lalitha Ranjani's Learning Journey

Lalitha Ranjani's journey was facilitated by Azad Foundation core team members Madhu and Malini and divided into two parts.

#### ➤ **Part 1: Interaction with Women with Wheels Trainees**

At Azad's North Delhi Center, Lalitha engaged with 17 trainees and 5 team members from the program. During this interactive session, she highlighted the pervasive nature of gender inequality in Sri Lanka, drawing parallels with the Indian context and underscoring its global relevance. She spoke about the barriers women face in accessing education, employment, healthcare, and political participation, despite progress through legal reforms and awareness campaigns. Sharing her personal journey of overcoming gender-based challenges, Lalitha emphasized the transformative power of education and awareness. She inspired the trainees to not only pursue their own empowerment but also to engage their communities in fostering gender equality and driving systemic change.



#### ➤ **Part 2: Interaction with Domestic Workers**

The second part of Lalitha's journey included a session with 20 domestic workers, organized in collaboration with Nirmana Foundation and the Gharelu Kamgar Panchayat Sangam (GKPS), a trade union representing over 3,000 domestic workers. The workers shared stories of their collective efforts to negotiate fair wages, secure weekly days off, and assert their rights, supported by the union's advocacy. Lalitha commended their resilience and reiterated the dual challenges women workers face—balancing workplace struggles with household responsibilities.

She stressed the critical role unions play in empowering women to claim their rights and achieve equitable treatment.



### Learning Journey for Nikhil and Sunil

A parallel learning journey for Nikhil and Sunil was organized by Hari Sharma (Core Team Member, Azad Foundation) and Shrinivas Rao (National Leadership Team, Azad).

#### ➤ **Roundtable Discussion: Engaging Men and Boys for Gender Equality**

On November 29, a roundtable discussion brought together experts and practitioners to explore innovative strategies for engaging men and boys in advancing gender equality. Key participants included Nayana from Breakthrough, Nida from CEQUIN, Sukannya from Pravah, Sunil Tandon from Pro Sports Development, and members of Azad Foundation's leadership team, alongside awardees Sunil and Nikhil. The discussion began with warm introductions, followed by a rich exchange of ideas on community engagement, school-based interventions, and leveraging social media campaigns to challenge patriarchal norms. Participants emphasized the importance of context-specific approaches, collaborative alliances, and the use of digital platforms to reach adolescent boys and young men. Key takeaways included the significance of multifaceted engagement strategies, a nuanced understanding of power dynamics, and the need for collective efforts to achieve sustainable impact. The discussion not only fostered knowledge sharing but also reinforced a shared commitment to building a more equitable society.



➤ **Interactive Session on Masculinity and Change**

Later that day, Nikhil and Sunil facilitated an interactive session with 20 boys aged 15-20 from the Men for Gender Justice program. Drawing on their work challenging patriarchal and gender norms, they encouraged participants to reflect on personal and family-level transformations. Discussions centered on breaking harmful stereotypes, embracing unpaid care work, and fostering gender equality within families. Many boys shared transformative experiences, including improved relationships through emotional vulnerability and open communication, particularly with their fathers. The session highlighted the importance of access to information, supportive networks, education, and role models in fostering meaningful change. This enriching dialogue underscored the critical need for sustained engagement with men and boys to challenge toxic masculinity and promote gender equality, paving the way for a society rooted in mutual respect and understanding.



## The Kamla Bhasin Award Ceremony 2024: Strength in Collaboration

The Stein Auditorium at the India Habitat Center on 30<sup>th</sup> of November 2024 was brimming with activity since early morning with members from all three organizations gathered to create an atmosphere of camaraderie, togetherness, humility – values that represented the ethos around which Kamla Bhasin worked all her life. The strength of the community was also reflected in the award ceremony with several Sakha drivers and trainers from Azad Foundation confidently ushered the guests to their seating positions and interacted with them. These women embodied the very empowerment which Kamla Bhasin envisioned for all the women across South Asia. The guests of the award ceremony included, members from other national and international organizations, grassroots organizations representatives, media persons and alumni community members trained from Azad Foundation in Delhi.



The programme began in this vibrant atmosphere with the Emcee, Neharika Mahajan from Nirantar taking the mic to welcome all the guests to the third Kamla Bhasin award ceremony. She commenced by emphasizing the principles of connecting and uniting which Kamla stood for in her life. Kamla firmly believed that we are connected through roots of a tree that unites people through its roots despite differences created through physical boundaries, different thought processes, philosophies. Her life was an example of this belief which she held. Neharika evocatively weaved an atmosphere to make the audience wait in anticipation to hear more about Kamla and her inspiring work by sharing, *“Kamla belonged to the world and she made the world her own. The verses that she sang, the people that she nurtured and the love that she gave so readily, Kamla lives on...”*

### A Short Film on Kamla’s Life

The film began with beautiful lines from Kamla’s poem – **“लड़कियों को उड़ने में मज़ा आता है”** लड़कियों को उड़ने में मज़ा आता है। इसलिए वे कभी-कभी पतंग बन जाती हैं। उड़ती हैं, मचलती हैं, लहराती हैं, और कट जाती हैं। Her legacy was captured through the defining moments of her journey where she not only inspired people across South Asia through her work in Food and Agriculture Organisation, in the UN but also globally through her pioneering movement – **One Billion Rising** against gender-based violence. The film emphasized Kamla Bhasin’s work for peace, democracy, human rights and equality for all within the South Asian region.



Followed by the film, a video message was played from Her excellency, Chandrika Kumaratunga, former President of Sri Lanka who was also touched by Kamla's life as many others in the audience and across the world. In the message, Kamla's engagement and her tireless work in the fight for violence against women within her home country and outside. Her work on peace and harmony was particularly mentioned by Kumaratunga who quoted Kamla, "*Without peace in South Asia, there can be no progress and that walls turned sideways to bridges.*" With this Kamla worked hard to break the walls created both physically and otherwise and create bridges of peace and harmony. The work she did to end violence against women was deeply connected to peace and human security as she firmly believed that peace cannot exist without justice. Her excellency said that Kamla's message and her work is more relevant today than ever before. She ended her message by stating hoping and firmly believing that this award will inspire young men, women and trans people fighting for gender justice and will together work to make Kamla's vision of a better world and reality.

**Hope Chigudu**, from Uganda who was the Chief Guest of the event was invited to the stage by Neharika. She was felicitated by the Chief Functionary of Azad Foundation, Dolon Ganguly. Hope read out a beautiful letter she had penned for Kamla with parts of this letter read by other members of the organizing committee - Deotima from Azad Foundation, Biraj Patnaik and Radhika from NFI and Neharika from Nirantar. Below is a summary of the letter in Hope's own words:

*Kamla, today we gather at the Stein Auditorium, India Habitat Centre, New Delhi, to honor your extraordinary journey and transformative contributions. Your life was a vibrant tapestry of resilience, love, and fearlessness, intricately woven with stories of power, friendship, and humanity. You taught us to embrace contradictions, to hold discomfort, and to approach life with generosity and solidarity. From fostering feminist consciousness in rural India through Jagori to creating sanctuaries of reflection and dialogue, you touched countless lives with your intellect, courage, and unyielding commitment to justice. Your writings, activism, and poetry inspired us to confront oppressive norms, imagine new futures, and amplify silenced voices, leaving an enduring legacy of empowerment and agency. Your life's work was a beacon for collective learning, transformative activism, and cross-movement alliances. You nurtured young leaders, strengthened collaborations, and engaged with intergenerational communities, championing the voices of the marginalized. Kamla, you reminded us to slow down, reflect, and root our actions in humanity and justice. As we celebrate your legacy, we commit to continuing the journey you began—one of courage, reflection, and collective transformation. Let us ask ourselves how we can*

*embody the spirit of your work and what we will leave behind to be celebrated in the years to come.*



### Diversity of applications

After Hope’s inspiring letter was read aloud by her and the organizing committee members of the Kamla Bhasin Awards, a poignant video message from the Chairperson of the Jury, Radhika Coomaraswamy, was shared. In her address, Radhika emphasized the enduring significance of these awards and the remarkable range of applications received this year. Speaking on behalf of all the Jury members, she underscored that the award pays tribute to the extraordinary life of Kamla Bhasin—a life devoted to the empowerment of marginalized groups, especially women. Radhika described Kamla as a radiant beacon for women across South Asia, whose legacy continues to inspire and guide countless individuals today. *“Kamla,”* she said, *“was a fearless voice for those abandoned by society. Her efforts and her unwavering commitment to justice will never be forgotten. We remember Kamla, and we miss her deeply.”* Radhika highlighted the diverse geographical representation among the applicants this year, with entries spanning the entirety of South Asia. Following a rigorous shortlisting process, the Jury convened in October to deliberate and make their decisions. The applications reflected an extraordinary breadth of work and innovation—young men championing gender equality, women excelling in non-traditional livelihoods and engaging in groundbreaking physical activities, women with disabilities showing unparalleled resilience, individuals creatively challenging sexual and gender norms, and trade unionists and labor activists tirelessly



advocating for the rights of working-class women. Given the exceptional quality of applications and the inspiring work of so many candidates, the Jury decided to introduce a special award in each category to



honor their efforts. In closing, Radhika offered heartfelt wishes of fortitude and strength to all the awardees. She encouraged them with these powerful words: *“Your struggles are not solitary. South Asia stands with you, in solidarity, as you continue to break barriers and fight for justice.”*

## Celebrating the Winners of the Kamla Bhasin Awards 2024

### Category 1 - A Woman (cis/trans) practitioner of Non-Traditional Livelihoods

It was time to celebrate the award winners of the event and for this, Neharika invited the Jury member, Khushi Kabir to the stage to announce the winner of Category 2 and she was felicitated by Mehtab, Lead Communications, NFI. Khushi Khabir shared her connection with Kamla and how this connect brought them together several times to work together and in collaboration for the women in South Asia. She spoke about Kamla’s belief in one South Asia and a large number of South Asian groups Khushi is associated with were either initiated or introduced by Kamla. Khushi also shared that this was a very poignant moment for her as it was her first time she is in Delhi in Kamla’s absence. However, she felt Kamla’s presence in the hall and before announcing the first award, she said the following about Kamla – *“Some people live on for who they are, who they have touched and how and what they have been. Kamla meant much more to each one of us because of the way she touched our lives.”* Khushi then announced the winner for Category 2 Lalitha to the stage to receive the award. Lalitha was awarded the Kamla Bhasin Award for Category 2 by Khushi Kabir. She gave a short acceptance speech in Sinhala which was translated by Shyama.

**Acceptance Speech from Lalitha** - In her acceptance speech, Lalitha shared the remarkable journey of her life and the struggles she has faced—both as an individual and as a trade unionist fighting tirelessly for women's rights. With humility and pride, she reflected on her nearly three-decade-long journey as a garment sector worker and trade unionist, championing the rights of women from diverse ethnicities and children from all walks of life. Lalitha acknowledged that while her journey has been deeply rewarding and fulfilling, it has not been without its share of challenges, particularly as a woman navigating this sector. Yet, she emphasized, these challenges were met with unwavering determination, collective resilience, and an unrelenting belief in justice. She admitted that she never anticipated receiving the Kamla Bhasin award, and in her heartfelt gratitude, she extended her thanks to the organizers and the feminists who



made this honor possible. True to her values, she dedicated the award to her community, the countless individuals whose voices and struggles have inspired her fight for equality. *“This award,” she said, “is not just a recognition of my work—it is a beacon of hope and strength. It will fuel my resolve to continue this journey, to push boundaries, and to uplift those who have been unheard and unseen.”* To conclude her speech, Lalitha sang a few poignant lines from a Sinhala song, a tribute to Kamla Bhasin’s creativity and

feminist activism. The lyrics carried a profound message: *“Nations are built by the hands of those who toil under the Sun and Rain. Yet, which world will the children visit to hear their sorrows?”* With those powerful words, she ended her speech, leaving the audience inspired and reflective.

### **Category 2 – A Transman working towards a gender just ecosystem**

To announce the next awardee, Binda Pandey, a member of the Jury was invited to the stage and she was felicitated by Ishant Rajput, the country co-lead of iPartner India. Binda Pandey before announcing the winner in the Second category, remembered her association with Kamla Bhasin whom she met in 1996 for the first time while facilitating a programme in Nepal. Over the course of these years and several meetings Kamla became a great friend of the Nepalese women’s and trade union’s movement. Kamla as shared by Binda was an icon and inspiration for the feminists and feminist movements in South Asia – a strength within everyone whenever a personal or movement related struggle is faced by the people of South Asia. She said that she is privileged to be part of this event since its inception. Binda Pandey announced the winner of the Category 2– Sunil Mohan R.

**Acceptance Speech from Sunil** – In his acceptance speech, Sunil began by expressing his heartfelt gratitude to the organizers for honoring him with this prestigious award, the first of its kind in his journey



within this sector. He called it a milestone moment in his life, one that carried both profound meaning and great responsibility. He extended his deepest thanks to his co-travelers and friends who have stood steadfastly by his side throughout this journey. He also took a moment to solemnly remember those who could not continue alongside him—those who succumbed to the weight of society’s intolerance. Their absence, he said, is a stark reminder of the work that remains unfinished. Sunil acknowledged all the individuals who

have been sources of strength and courage, enabling him to persevere against all odds. Their support, he said, has been a light in the darkest times of his fight for justice and equality.

He concluded his speech with a powerful promise- *“This award is not just a recognition; it is a call to take on greater responsibility. I pledge to carry forward Kamla Bhasin’s vision, upholding the dignity of her work and the transformative power of her ideas. This fight for inclusivity, for the dignity and equality of all human beings in our country, is not just my mission—it is my life’s work. And I will continue this fight until my last breath.”*

#### **Category 1 – Special Jury Award – A Woman (cis/trans) practitioner of Non-Traditional Livelihoods**

Thanking Sunil for a powerful message, Neharika moved to the Special Jury Awards. She invited Alka Sharma, Board Member, Azad Foundation to announce the award in Category 1 of the Special Jury Award. Before giving away the award, Alka shared with the audience her association with Kamla which went back to the winters of 1984. Her electrifying presence is something that she will always remember and that it was privilege to know Kamla. Alka then announced the Special Jury Award for Category 1 – a woman from non-traditional livelihoods – Jaya Chakma. After receiving her award from Alka Sharma, Jaya gave her acceptance speech in Bangla which was translated by Dolon Ganguly.

**Acceptance Speech from Jaya** – Jaya began her acceptance speech by recounting a deeply personal and transformative incident from her life. One day, after a grueling practice session, she was traveling on a public bus when she experienced sexual harassment. The perpetrators, a group of young boys, targeted her for wearing a football jersey. At the time, Jaya internalized the blame, feeling she had somehow provoked the attack through her choice of attire. The shame and guilt weighed heavily on her, causing her to question her profession and her two-decade-long journey as a competitive football player. This pivotal moment came when she was 27 years old. It led her to reflect on whether her years of playing football— a passion she had pursued since 2002—had been worth the struggle. It was during this dark period that she stumbled upon a video of Kamla Bhasin, whose words pierced through her despair: “No one has kept



*their honor in different parts of their body. If anyone touches those parts, our honor is not diminished or lost.”* These words became a lifeline for Jaya, offering her a perspective that reshaped her understanding of dignity and self-worth. Inspired by Kamla’s courage and wisdom, Jaya resolved to rise above her pain and dedicate herself to empowering others. Today, she trains a group of 60 young girls—not only in football but also in resilience and self-belief. She teaches them that no one’s disrespect or misconduct defines their worth, nor is it

their burden to bear. Jaya also proudly shared her heritage, belonging to the Chakma community of Bangladesh, a group of four lakh individuals in a nation of 18 crore. Despite the odds stacked against her as a woman, an athlete, and a minority, she has persevered, achieving milestones she once thought impossible. Receiving the Kamla Bhasin Award, she said, was a profound honor and a powerful encouragement to continue her journey. She vowed to keep working as a warrior inspired by Kamla’s legacy, advocating for justice, equality, and the unyielding spirit of women everywhere. In closing, Jaya thanked the organizers and the audience for recognizing her efforts, dedicating the award to her community, and promising to carry forward Kamla Bhasin’s torch of hope and activism.

### **Category 2 – Special Jury Awards – A male working toward gender just ecosystem**

Moving on to the Jury Award in the second category, Neharika invited Dr. Sanjay Patra, the Chair of iPartner India to join on the stage to announce the award in this category. Dr. Patra was introduced by Neharika as someone who is associated with the development sector for the last 30 years and his experience and expertise in financial governance have contributed in strengthening organizations in India and South Asia. He said that he also had the privilege of knowing Kamla since 2000 whom he had met on several occasions. He shared that Kamla among other things was also a humorist who had a bag full of jokes. She wrote a few books and whenever they met there was an exchange of jokes. Sanjay announced the Special Jury award in Category 2 to Nikhil Taneja – a male working toward gender just ecosystem.

**Nikhil's acceptance speech** – Speaking in Hindi, he began by expressing his heartfelt gratitude to the three organizing member organizations for the award. He said it was not just a proud moment for him but also a profound responsibility. He shared a personal account from eight years ago when he was diagnosed with clinical anxiety. Struggling under the weight of social stigma, he found himself unable to open up about his challenges to anyone. After years of therapy, he realized a harsh truth: he was not alone in his battle with loneliness, but like many other men, he was conditioned to face it in silence. The message he received from all corners—relatives, friends, teachers, and society—was the same: “Be a man.” This simple phrase carried complex and toxic expectations. He explained:



Men are told not to cry in public.  
Men are told not to express vulnerability.  
Men are taught to show anger but conceal pain.  
Men are expected to provide for their families, no matter the personal cost.

These stereotypes of masculinity, ingrained by society, trap men in roles that deny them their humanity. “Some of us fight these stereotypes,” he said, “while others live under their burden.” To challenge these norms, he created the talk show “Be a Man Yaar.” On this platform, celebrated figures like Javed Akhtar, Naseeruddin Shah, Vikas Dwivedi, and Vicky Kaushal shared their thoughts on redefining masculinity. The show delivers a simple yet powerful message:

When someone tells a man not to cry, he can respond, “It’s alright to cry and still be a man, yaar.”

When someone says men can’t feel pain, he can reply, “Feeling pain doesn’t make you weak; it makes you human. Be a man, yaar.”

When someone claims showing emotion is a sign of weakness, he can offer a hug and say, “Expressing feelings is a strength. Be a man, yaar.”

In conclusion, he delivered a poignant message in English:

"For centuries, we have been telling young women they don't have to be just nurturers—they can also be providers. Let us not take centuries to tell our young men they don't have to be just providers—they can also be nurturers. The real danger in our society is that men are being taught how to 'be a man' before they are taught how to 'be human.' Let's change that." His words resonated as a call for a more compassionate and inclusive understanding of masculinity, one that embraces humanity at its core.

Neharika thanked Nikhil and said that it reminded her and the audience today of Hope's words about *“what are the radical possibilities of joy in the world we live in and also how we treat our bodies as homes.”*

All the winners were appreciated with an applause from the audience along with a gratitude for the Jury members. With award completing three years of its journey, there was a special announcement for which Neharika invited Biraj Patnaik executive director NFI; Meenu Vadera founder of Azad Foundation and Nisha Dubey the country co-lead of iPartner India to make the announcement. Meenu shared that this was a special moment for all of them as Kamla Bhasin award has completed three years, a journey which has been wonderful, beautiful, vibrant and so much like Kamla would have loved to be associated with. This could not have been possible without the people sitting in this room, without the impactful

applications received over the years, without the beautiful collaboration that existed between the three organizations – an experience that embodied what Kamla stood for – collectivization, spirit of South Asian regionalism. Over the last three years, 211 applications were received – 157 in Category 1 and 54 in Category 2 from people living in difficult circumstances across diversities leading to building a collage of experiences which helped identify some of the gems in the last three years. In the spirit of South Asian solidarity, it has been decided to send Kamla Bhasin to her lovely preferred home in Nepal. Meenu invited Rama and Urmila from TEWA – Women’s Fund of Nepal with the announcement that the award will be hosted by TEWA next year in Kathmandu, Nepal. A painting of Kamla was gifted to the new organizers of the award from this year’s organizers. Rama from TEWA sang a song frequently sung by Kamla Bhasin and said that this song was inspirational for her. She continued that on behalf of TEWA, it is truly a privilege to celebrate the life and legacy of Kamla Bhasin. Her life is an inspiration for all who are working to create a gender just society. In 2015, she had the honour of meeting Kamla in a Sangat meeting in Kathmandu and this was transformative meeting for her as it deepened her understanding of empowerment, grassroots activism and shaped her journey in many ways. They have named one of their training halls after Kamla Bhasin’s name, they have planted a sweet orange tree and every year the tree is growing steadfastly to bear fruits and spread the flavours that Kamla spread in her journey. The soil for the tree was brought from Kamla’s residence to nurture the tree which constantly reminds them of her spirit, vision and belief in social change. On behalf of TEWA – Women’s Fund she said that they would accept to humbly host the Kamla Bhasin Award Ceremony next year in TEWA in Kathmandu and would be a privilege to welcome everyone to Nepal.

### Usha Uthup Electrifies the Kamla Bhasin Awards

As the Kamla Bhasin Awards reached their grand crescendo, Neharika took the stage with an air of excitement and anticipation. She announced that the audience was holding its breath, awaiting the arrival of a living legend—none other than the iconic and unforgettable Usha Uthup. Recently honored with the Padma Bhushan, India’s third-highest civilian award, and a recipient of the Padma Shri in 2011, Usha ji’s presence alone lit up the Stein Auditorium. With the crowd erupting in applause, Usha ji made her entrance, exuding grace and charisma. She warmly thanked her fans and supporters for their unwavering encouragement throughout her 55-year journey in music, a feat few can rival. She also took a moment to commend Anjana, her chauffeur from Azad Foundation, for her exceptional driving skills—a gesture that exemplified her humility and gratitude. Neharika then invited Satyanand Mishra and Biraj Patnaik to present Usha ji with a special memento—a token of love and appreciation from feminists across South Asia for her solidarity and shared vision with Kamla Bhasin.

### Usha Uthup’s Words of Inspiration

Taking the microphone, Usha ji captivated the audience not only with her voice but with her wisdom. She urged everyone to strike the word "retirement" from their vocabulary, advocating for a life of endless dreams and relentless passion.



"Every woman's issue is also a man's issue," she proclaimed, emphasizing the importance of walking hand in hand with men to foster understanding and progress. Her message was clear: the journey toward gender equality thrives on unity and mutual support. She credited her inner shakti and encouraged the audience to dream big, just as she had pledged with Kamla Bhasin. With a heartfelt thank you to her team—Samaresh and Rinta—and her husband for their invaluable support, she inspired everyone to pursue their dreams with determination and gratitude.

### A Musical Extravaganza

The event reached its zenith when Usha ji took center stage to perform some of her most beloved songs. Numbers like Hare Rama Hare Krishna, Duniya Mein Logon Ko, Doston Se Pyar Kiya, Ajeeb Dastan, and Jaane Jaan had the audience dancing, swaying, and singing along. The atmosphere turned electric, with every corner of the auditorium resonating with joy and harmony. The maestro's performance culminated in a poignant moment of solidarity for One Billion Rising, a global campaign against violence toward women. At her request, the crowd illuminated the darkened auditorium with their phone flashlights, creating a breathtaking scene of unity and hope. With this final song, Usha ji signed off in style, leaving an indelible mark on every heart present.



### A Memorable Wrap-Up

As the music faded, Neharika returned to the stage to thank everyone for their participation, extending an invitation to a sumptuous lunch on the lawns outside the auditorium. The third Kamla Bhasin Awards concluded with a sense of fulfillment, joy, and inspiration. Attendees left with Usha Uthup's empowering words and soul-stirring melodies echoing in their hearts, ensuring this day would remain etched in memory as a true celebration of life, music, and gender equality.

*"यह मत पूछो खुदा से कि मेरी मुश्किलें बड़ी हैं,  
यह कहो खुदा से कि मेरी मुश्किलों से मेरा खुदा बड़ा है।"*



## To Know More About the Awards

1. Live Stream of Kamla Bhasin Award Ceremony- 30 Nov, 2024:  
[https://www.youtube.com/live/1J6pdgVq19o?si=cU1C0u\\_ci3tH2Xc9](https://www.youtube.com/live/1J6pdgVq19o?si=cU1C0u_ci3tH2Xc9)
2. Films on the work of Kamla Bhasin Award Winners 2024:  
[https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLPY1OgVlpgXAp5\\_lghlkt37i5tp984kKP&si=QEyKYiQ3QSC2A7am](https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLPY1OgVlpgXAp5_lghlkt37i5tp984kKP&si=QEyKYiQ3QSC2A7am)
3. Media Coverage:  
[https://docs.google.com/document/d/1e0gpMGXvZ8kilhw9AT5z1ldosiz71Gk9\\_2gGyEVFgu0/edit?usp=drive link](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1e0gpMGXvZ8kilhw9AT5z1ldosiz71Gk9_2gGyEVFgu0/edit?usp=drive_link)