SHEFALEE VASUDEV

Last Rights

By avoiding the usual signifiers of grief, Kavita Karkare let her will win

KAVITA Karkare, slain Maharashtra ATS chief Hemant Karkare's wife, did not meet Gujarat chief minister Narendra Modi when he dropped by at her home to offer condolence. Two days later, an image of dignified restraint, she came before the eyes of the tearful police force, friends and thousands of Mumbaikars who came to bid goodbye to her martyr husband. In both her actions, she made a choice. Blink, and you will miss the inspiration in that choice that needs to be emphasised.

In a society where grief over death is rarely a private practice, where formalised mourning rituals encourage families and communities to survive loss by reliving it through loud expressions, where bereaved women are expected to wear white and look distraught, Kavita Karkare refused to mount her sorrow publicly. The light had gone from her eyes, leaving behind an opaque curtain of despondence. But she held through, unknowingly conveying the power of personal will. Dressed in a red and light brown sari, a small bindi on her foreheard, a red bangle on one of her arms, her hair neatly combed, she projected an image of forbearance that badly needs to be registered in our collective consciousness as dark fears surround us.

AP

Kavita Karkare at the funeral

The life-denying white of widowhood is now being given a decent burial. Let's hope cinema also takes note and rewrites cliched film versions of funerals where women in extreme white bid theatrical goodbyes to fallen soldiers. Remember Kareena Kapoor in *LOC Kargil*? Kavita may not be the first woman to wear a red bindi at her husband's funeral, but as the stoic wife of a martyr, she should inspire women who feel pressurised to lament death in socially accepted ways. Or suffer because people want them to suffer. Years back, after the death of her husband Dr Bali, renowned dancer-actress Vyjanthimala continued to sport marital symbols, confessing that they resonated remembrance and love for her husband. All of us know a few women who made similar choices. Instead of abandoning them within hours, using signs of marriage as support systems in loss is a touching way to cope with heartbreak such as Kavita's. In all our talk of the women's movement in India and stories of personal evolutions, we have forgotten to list how some women now deal with mourning and widowhood. Why some no longer want to be a part of the chest-beating community where bangle-breaking, wiping off the bindi and appearing dishevelled is considered appropriate widow response. Kavita, just by being herself, mirrored this change that must be noticed. Instead of breaking down in copious tears or succumbing to fainting spells before the world, she stood silently, struck mute by grief. What comes across—and not all of it can be emotional paralysis—is will over obligation. Let's salute it.

Nobody judges people by the way they grieve. There is nothing wimpish about white or black, both significant colours of death in different cultures. We don't even know how Vinita Kamte, spouse of ACP Ashok Kamte, or encounter specialist Vijay Salaskar's wife reacted to the news of their husbands' deaths. Yet, none of them was seen screaming in front of TV cameras. If they had, nobody would have raised an eyebrow. The fact that they did not is noteworthy. What matters is that Kavita spoke of Modi—a man who slandered her husband a few days back for manipulation of the Malegaon blasts probe—as an "elderly man". The image we will remember is of her deathly calm during the funeral. Not of a wailing widow, cursing politicians because the situation gave her sanction. This image should remind us that individuality is our closest friend in bereavement.

Kavita's personalisation of grief during the very public funeral of her husband is an interesting starting point to understand how cultural changes in India emerge even in death. What an unlikely time to realise with reassurance and respect how stereotyped widowhood is changing without opening rebellious fire on anyone's feelings.

In this confessional era of ours when TV acts as mediator, offering conversation and commiseration; when the internet has opened graveyards to bloggers, when the rudaalis of the past are replaced by bereavement websites, candlelight marches and empathetic SMSes, Kavita Karkare's restraint is indicative of how we learn to form our boundaries, creating a private space for grief even when it is invaded by goodwill. When an entire nation mourns the passing away of a loved one, resilient silence is a new rite of passage. ◘