

India: Why I joined AAP and Quit the CPI - A Personal Journey

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I first became conscious of politics as a student of economics in Kirorimal College, Delhi University in 1969 when I was elected to the students union executive committee. The same year I was persuaded by a senior to stand for the Delhi University Students Union's Supreme Council. The latter body elected the DUSU office bearers. These were heady days with some of the leading pro-Naxalites students, students like Avdesh Sinha, who later became a highly respected IAS officer, and Rabindra Ray now a sociology professor in Delhi University. Another leading star who has written on his experiences was Dilip Simeon. I also became Left but did not agree with armed struggle. At this stage I watched the mainstream Left parties and along with Marxist texts read some Left Party pamphlets.

However, a deeper and much more expansive debate was snowballing where I joined in JNU in 1972. Prakash Karat who had earlier written a thought provoking book on the nationality and language question in India was widely respected as a political leader of the JNU students and a formidable theorist. In 1973, the Student Federation of India and the All India Students Federation of which I was the unit secretary aligned for the first time after the split in the communist movement in 1964. We called the alliance progressive democratic front. We were also attacked by an extremely erudite Trotskyist Jairus Banaji who considered us revisionist and quoted extensively from Marxist classics as well as literature, philosophy and the social sciences. Because of this challenge all of us had to do our readings.

JNU also produced the Freethinkers of which Anand Kumar, a socialist activist became a formidable leader and when the SFI-AISF alliance broke became the president of the JNU students union. This taught me a lesson that I have not forgotten. It is essential to maintain unity of similar progressive forces which include social movements who play an irreplaceable role.

For the last 30 plus years I have worked with social movements and learnt immensely from their leaders like Medha Patkar, Alok Aggarwal, Chitraroopa Palit, Nandita Haksar, Jean Dreze, Aruna Roy, Nikhil Dey and a host of others. This experience along with the CPI was critical to my development and opened my eyes to many realities, and the dangers of split between social movements, new political formations and the Left. I realized that social movements were absolutely critical to any progressive movement.

Though some of us from the Left did work with these movements, there is great need for social and political movements to build cross cutting solidarities in regions skimpily reported to cite just one glaring example is Kashmir.

My economics teacher Arun Bose, a former CPI central committee member used to stress that apart from economics one should study critical parts of social sciences and philosophy. I have never forgotten that lesson. But the World and India have changed since those days. The bulwark of national liberation struggles, the Soviet Union is gone. China lacks the political energy to support other movements primarily because its concern with its own problems.

On my part I participated as a three time president of the JNU Teachers Association and had the privilege of working with many human rights organizations. After the 1984 Sikh riots in which I managed to move around, even on November 1st, 1984, with the help of a friend in the press. I was so shaken by the terrible paradox that even in middle class colonies people were guarding the residence not from rioters but from alleged well armed Sikhs. Other rumors of poisoned water were spread all over. After this traumatic experience I vowed that I would fight communalism, especially Hindu communalism, with all the resources at my command. After 1984 I went on fact finding missions with others, to Malliana, Hashimpura, Meerut, Ayodhya (1992, 93); three times to Gujarat and elsewhere. And now twice to Muzaffarnagar.

This fight continues. My joining AAP is to support a new political party that is linked with social movements. It was an extremely difficult decision since I had been in the Communist Party for 40 years and had later become a member of the national council. A lot of what I am is therefore an amalgam of the experience of social movements, the experience of the Left, and some erudite pro-people intellectuals like Shobhanlal Datta Gupta, Sudipto Kaviraj, Rajiv Bhargav, Romilla Thapar, Amit Bhaduri, Jayati Ghosh, Zoya Hassan, Achin Vanaik, Praful Bidwai, Seema Mustafa, Deepak Nayar, Ghanshyam Shah and many many others.

This is a critical time for Indian secularism. It is naive to say that AAP has no theory. As Gramsci repeatedly stressed, all people in some way or another are intellectuals. His major distinction was between traditional intellectuals who defend and legitimize traditional ideologies and monopolist use of power. Their rivals, essential for change and even a revolution, are organic intellectuals who are rooted in popular movements and popular culture.

No party is perfect. The Left can claim much credit, specially in the past for what they have done and for having brought new popular ideas and concepts into the public domain and national politics. But the situation is particularly tough now as a large section of the big bourgeoisie is actively supporting Narendra Modi and the RSS. The middle strata has also been considerably influenced by the Modi campaign. To write off the AAP, as the Left is doing is to miss the relevance of the AAP resurgence in Delhi and from membership it appears, even other urban cities including Ahmedabad, which Modi considers his fiefdom.

I had to take a decision whether I would move away from the Party which has moulded me and from hundreds of comrades throughout the country who would see this as an opportunist attempt at power. I am capable of many mistakes but seeking political power at any cost is not one of them. I wish all secular forces all the best. I will remain left and my ideology will not change. The question is will a popular alliance remember Muzaffarnagar and Shamli in the hope that they will get few Lok Sabha seats. This will be a terrible miscalculation and a concession to the SP apparat which allowed Muzaffarnagar to happen. In the end my answer to this question shaped my decision.

Kamal Mitra Chenoy

P.S.

* <http://kafila.org/2014/01/17/why-i-joined-aap-and-quit-the-cpi-kamal-mitra-chenoy/>