

India: The Kavita Krishnan Saga: Holding a Mirror to the Left

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Krishnan finds no reason for the Indian Left to make common cause with such authoritarian regimes anywhere. What do other prominent communists think?

The dilemmas of the Left in contemporary Indian polity are up for debate once again in the wake of Kavita Krishnan's [abrupt resignation](#) from all the positions she held in the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation, and the reasons she attributed to her decision. With the Narendra Modi-led Hindu nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government firmly in power, the once-powerful Left parties have been rendered a marginal presence, both within and outside parliament.

Whether the Left parties can pursue their politics in the same vein when democratic values are increasingly coming under threat is moot. Also how far can Left parties oppose a regime with authoritarian and Islamophobic tendencies in India even as they are ambivalent to the Russian and Chinese establishments? Before we move any further, it is important to understand how Kavita Krishnan's resignation is an important step towards recognising a problem.

For someone who was part of the CPI(ML) Liberation from her student days to becoming its Politburo member in 2013, giving up on the party may not have been easy. It would have come from a lot of reflection and contemplation. Speaking extensively to *The Wire*, Krishnan explained that her decision was influenced by the erosion of democratic values in India under the Modi regime. "Democracies are under danger across the world; even in India, we are realising how fragile it is; strengthening democratic values is the only bulwark against authoritarianism."

However, it is Krishnan's public disavowal of the Russian and Chinese regimes with all their socialist pretences that has irked those affiliated with the Left in India. "We can't say that Stalin was a socialist but...let's be clear that Stalin was a mass murderer who committed crimes against humanity. China's backing of the Myanmar regime which persecutes Rohingyas and its own Islamophobic policies on Uyghur Muslims needs to be condemned in no uncertain terms," she said. While these are more in line with a liberal line of thought, Krishnan snaps at the suggestion. "I am a revolutionary Marxist to the core," she declared.

Veteran Communist Party of India (Marxist) leader S. Ramachandran Pillai begs to differ. Speaking to *The Wire* from Thiruvananthapuram, he stated: "Kavita Krishnan seems to be confused about Marxism." Comrade SRP, as he is better known, caused a furore after defending China at the CPI(M) state conference in Kochi earlier this year, adding that the world was ganging up against that country.

Asked what he thought about Krishnan's criticism of China and Putin's Russia vis-à-vis Ukraine, SRP argued that any such criticism has to be put in the wider context of the designs of the US and its allies. When this was put to Krishnan, she retorted: "What has the US got to do with China's atrocities against Uyghur Muslims?"

On being asked whether she was more in line with a social democratic worldview now, Krishnan vehemently denied it. “What’s with these little labels? I am a committed communist for the last three decades and come from the same place. But the commitment to protecting democracy must not only be limited to India but all over the world. There is a constant refrain that Chinese, Russian and Arab civilisations predate the Johnny-come-lately liberal western democracies and their concept of human rights. Modi gets the impunity to pursue Islamophobic citizenship rights if we extend that argument. Liberty is non-negotiable.”

C.P. John, general secretary of the Communist Marxist Party (CMP), the party originally founded by Kannur strongman M.V. Raghavan, explained how it was important for Krishnan to not abandon the communist ethos to make her case with progressive radicals, unlike, say, Mikhail Gorbachev. According to John, “Dictatorship of the proletariat is a proven farce; Rosa Luxemburg had flagged it a century ago. It may not be wrong as a concept, but hasn’t worked in action.” John, who still identifies himself as a Marxist, continued, “Human rights, freedom of speech and a free press are a pre-requisite to any functioning democracy.”

K. Venu, once the leader of a Naxalite faction in Kerala who has since contested elections, albeit unsuccessfully, with K.R. Gowri’s splinter party, sounded skeptical. Now identifying himself as a “liberal democrat”, Venu, speaking from his home in Ayyanthol in Trissur, stated: “Communist regimes world over has been the most authoritarian. What is generally explained as a revolution is actually a coup d’état. Can you name one instance where a revolution has been peaceful? Cuba comes closest, but even the Russian revolution was a coup, in that sense.” Venu argued that Marxism as an ideology is fundamentally flawed, differing with C.P. John on that count.

Today Venu is an influential public intellectual in Kerala who writes extensively on the democratic deficit under communist regimes in his columns. His book, *Oru Communistkarante Janadhipathya Sangalpangal* (A communist’s idea of democracy), is widely quoted. According to him, private capital and competition are integral to a functioning democracy, and he backs the Scandinavian model of welfare economies as ideal.

Krishnan, however, stands for a “socialist democracy”, and argued that real socialism should be more democratic than western democracies. “I am not saying that a liberal democracy is the last word.” But Krishnan finds no reason for the Indian Left to make common cause with such authoritarian regimes anywhere.

Asked whether she has any reference points or people who inspired her to take a stand, including Rosa Luxemburg, Krishnan names the civil liberties activist [K. Balagopal](#).

There was some confusion regarding Krishnan’s statement about being allowed to remain a member of the party, which didn’t happen. According to Krishnan, “nobody can take CPI (ML) Liberation out of me”, but didn’t comment on what exactly prevented her from continuing as a member.

On his part, the CPI(ML) Liberation general secretary Dipankar Bhattacharya, speaking exclusively to *The Wire*, made the party’s stand clear: “I don’t know from where she got this idea. There is no difference between being a primary member and being a politburo member. The [first statement](#) Comrade Krishnan made on the Facebook page read like a farewell note. She said she couldn’t pursue the line she took by holding these positions in the party. Being a member means abiding by the party’s programme and the party’s constitution. If she continued to be a member, she would have then been in constant conflict with the party. We wanted things to be amicable.”

But Krishnan argued that her views were still in sync with the CPI (ML) Liberation. “If you check out the party’s [programme](#) (under the section People’s Democratic State), how exactly is what I am

saying different from the goals described for India there? The only possible difference is that I want the people of China too to have the same rights as described by the CPI (ML) Liberation as goals of India's democratic revolution, for the fullest development of socialist potential. India does not have these conditions now, and whatever elements of these conditions that have been won by people's movements are in danger from a fascist Modi regime today. Does China ruled by a so-called Communist party have these conditions? Do Chinese people not deserve each of these rights, including human rights? How can it be socialist to deny these rights that any capitalist democracy would claim to uphold in theory? We need to defend even a Biden against a Trump," she told *The Wire*.

To that, Bhattacharya only stated: "Our party programme is limited to India". Further, he added that Krishnan seemed to be in a hurry to part ways. "We are preparing for a party congress. We just had a central committee meeting in Vijayawada which she was expected to attend, where she could have discussed these things and proposed amendments to the program. She would have gotten more opportunities, but for that, you have to be prepared to go through the process. You have to be prepared for the possibility that you might be in a minority if others don't come around to your views."

G. Devarajan, the secretary of the All India Forward Bloc (AIFB), which recently dropped the 'hammer and sickle' from its flag, noted that "Kavita Krishnan should have continued fighting from within the party" even as he agreed with many of the substantial points raised by her.

The Communist Party of India (CPI) national executive member Annie Raja concurred with this view. "We have to keep fighting the good fight. No change can be initiated in a short span of time," she said.

Krishnan stated, "I tried my absolute best to convince my party" about her concerns. She further elaborated that "on issues of intellectual and historical debates, there cannot be a binding line. There has to be an evolution of views, just as the party came around to a different view on the issue of death penalty, for instance".

According to Bhattacharya, "agreement cannot be a precondition for discussions. The party has an understanding on international issues. Comrade Krishnan was a member of our editorial board and had every opportunity to write about China and other issues in our organ (Liberation) till she eventually made a choice - and we respect that."

According to another senior leader of the CPI (ML) Liberation who did not want to be named, Krishnan was requested to continue as secretary of the All India Progressive Women's Association (AIPWA), the women's wing of the party, but she wasn't keen. "Perhaps she had come to the realisation that her audience remained outside the party," the leader added.

As far as the party's position on international issues raised by Krishnan, Bhattacharya responded by saying, "We don't think settling scores with history is mandatory to combat fascism in India. We want to learn from history, but our focus is on the present - here and now. We don't think this is the time to exorcise the ghosts of the past."

Krishnan disagreed. She said, "The timing is important. And there was an urgency to acknowledge it, and the Modi regime's creeping authoritarianism has a bearing on my decision."

Bhattacharya stated that since Krishnan decided to part ways, he does not want to get into a debate with her. "The party wishes her well," he said.

But Krishnan declared that she considers herself very much part of the Left movement even now.

"The CPI (ML) Liberation has led movements which deeply democratised societies in Bihar and Jharkhand, especially with regard to caste and gender. I am only trying to make a connection between those movements and what they represented, the concept of liberty expounded by those intellectuals broadly from the party stable, and incorporating those lessons to the present."

On the question of Putin's attack on Ukraine, Bhattacharya's position was more ambivalent: "According to us, only America and NATO are benefitting from this war." On being asked if there was a double standard there, he replied: "Absolutely not. We have been publicly critical of China and the way they have treated its minorities, and we have also taken a position on Stalin's transgressions. Our view is that socialism can be achieved in a multi-party democracy, such as India."

While the CPI (ML) Liberation has been fairly progressive on this front, the CPI(M), for instance, continues to be dogmatic. While SRP bemoaned that international issues and China are routinely used to beat up the Left, he wasn't willing to concede that the CPI(M) was also to blame for its lack of flexibility.

Binoy Viswam, national secretariat member and Rajya Sabha MP of the CPI, weighed in: "We differ with the CPI (M) on many issues, including the Tiananmen Square massacre, and we were the first to dub the Modi regime fascist".

Asked about the CPI's stand vis-à-vis Stalin and how far it differed from the CPI(M), Viswam responded by stating that Stalin was no saint but, it was, in fact, the Chinese Communist Party's call that led to the CPI's split in 1964 and even the subsequent formation of the CPI(ML) in 1969 - events he identified as the root cause of the decline of the Left in India.

C.P. John saw this decline as an extension of events across the world and argued that the Soviet collapse was actually a consequence of the Stalin era rather than a reflection of Gorbachev's policies. G. Devarajan went further back to the Nazi-Soviet pact of 1939 to put things in perspective, recounting the shaky foundations on which the Soviet edifice stood.

Expectedly, Krishnan has come under vicious attack on social media from Leftist trolls. Asked whether she feels vindicated having raised the issue of democratic deficit within socialist confines, Krishnan said she was extremely pained and unhappy about it. "The attacks have mostly come from the CPI(M) cadres, including their recognised leaders, let's be clear on that. They are refusing to engage on an intellectual level and have instead resorted to personal attacks. It is a way of keeping facts out, which is unfortunate. The trolls have even dubbed me a CIA agent. To the CPI(M), I can only say that you can't attract decent young people by calling North Korea socialist. It's a bloody monarchy," she said.

It is pertinent to examine whether or not confronting such issues has been an impediment to the Left parties in India over the years. The concentration of power within Left parties is also something that has come under scrutiny as a corollary of authoritarian regimes. MLA K.K. Rema, the widow of slain Marxist renegade [T.P. Chandrasekharan](#), remarked: "In the [Revolutionary Marxist Party](#) (RMP), we have made a conscious choice to ensure that there is no concentration of power (with the secretary hemmed in by the president). I express my solidarity with Krishnan".

K.T. Kunhikannan, the leader of a CPI (ML) splinter group who joined the CPI(M) in the mid-2000s, sympathised with Krishnan although he noted that her exit from the party would only embolden the right-wing forces. This was also flagged by Bhattacharya when he raised the issue of the Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad (ABVP) at Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) using it to their ends. Krishnan went on to paraphrase Che Guevara's [famous quote](#): "If I tremble with indignation at

Stalin's or Xi's crimes against humanity as much as I do against Modi's or Hitler's or Putin's, am I not a comrade of yours?"

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