

In A Divisive Time, An Indian Politician Quits Her Party, Champions Human Rights Over All Else

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In a country where politicians practice self-preservation, Left leader Kavita Krishnan decided to stake her position and hold a mirror to her party of 30 years. A feminist who rejects sexual morality, criticises Prime Minister Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party and defends minorities and marginalised communities, Krishnan spoke to us about standing up for her beliefs, even when it meant giving up comrades and a way of life.

Delhi: The first time Kavita Krishnan heard the word “comrade”, synonymous with the Russian Revolution and the socialist order, was on the [Jawaharlal Nehru University](#) campus in Delhi, where she joined as a graduate student of English literature in July 1993.

The Babri Masjid in Ayodhya was [demolished](#) in December 1992, and she remembers the campus being overrun by “Hindu supremacists” flexing their muscles.

Like her father, A.S. Krishnan, an engineer from Tamil Nadu, Krishnan knew little of politics but was instinctively put off by the men of the [Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sevak Sangh](#) (RSS), who wore uniforms and anti-Muslim violence reminded them of the racist militias of Nazi Germany and fascist Italy.

So, she gravitated towards the [All India Students’ Association](#) (AISA), a left-wing student organisation of the [Communist Party of India \(Marxist-Leninist\) Liberation](#) CPI (ML), [born](#) of the peasant uprising of Naxalbari, West Bengal, in 1967.

Laughing out loud, Krishnan recalled her father, an avid reader of PG Wodehouse, asked her if they were the kind of communists who blew up trains.

She reassured him that they were not.

The AISA members she first encountered resisted othering non-Hindus and doing it in Hindi, a language that the right-wing [Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad](#) (ABVP) lay claim to.

“They spoke so powerfully and persuasively,” Krishnan said, in a conversation with **Article 14**, a few weeks after she broke with the CPI (ML), her party of three decades, over a question of championing human rights irrespective of a person’s ideology or system of government.

“They spoke a language I liked,” she said. “They spoke a feminist language. And they were speaking in Hindi, quoting the Ram Charit Manas to counter the Sangh’s rhetoric, Hindi poetry, and making the point that the Hindi belt culture was not about exclusion and bigotry,”

A fierce feminist and opponent of the Hindu right and the ruling [Bharatiya Janata Party](#), Krishnan,

49, was profoundly sad about the split but certain about rejecting double standards when it came to defending human rights and being on the right side of history.

To fight the Hindu majoritarian downslide and the persecution of minorities in India, she felt her party had to own up to the checkered past and present of the Left by unequivocally condemning [Joseph Stalin](#) as a mass murderer who ran a totalitarian state, [China's](#) internment of Uighur Muslims, and [Russia's](#) invasion of Ukraine.

In a world where the fallout from the horrific crimes cut across generations and informed the present, Krishnan did not feel her misgivings were a thing of the past or that she was being "irrational", "obsessive", and "emotional", as some of her colleagues had put it to her.

When she refused to comply with the party's demand that she avoid writing on these subjects without "permission", Krishnan said the resulting impasse ended with her being removed from the party.

"I did not expect or plan for this situation. A year ago, I would have said I'm in ML for life," said Krishnan. "The party was important to me. Social change is not about fighting alone or saying radical things that don't persuade others. You have to believe and work on things together."

"A Left with a cloudy vision that avoids facts, that sanitises reality to fit its theory, is a much weaker Left. The right can do it and be stronger. The right wing depends on tailoring reality to fit some self-serving myth. But a schizophrenic moral centre cripples the Left," she said.

Right Side Of History

The author of [Fearless Freedom](#), Krishnan has been jailed three times in the past 30 years, becoming vital to the CPI (ML), a party with few electoral victories but one that has stood up for India's most stricken communities and persisted in doing so after Prime Minister Narendra Modi and BJP's massive electoral victories ushered in a new level of [anti-Muslim persecution](#), [suppression of dissent](#), and [control of the media](#).

Exploding into the nation's consciousness with her [campaigning](#) and appearances on the news channels following the Delhi gang rape in 2012, Krishnan was the voice railing against benign patriarchy and restrictions on women's autonomy masquerading as protection.

India Today [called](#) her a mass mobiliser. Other [profiles](#) have [followed](#).

Long after most opposition leaders fell silent in the face of political compulsions, one of the few unbridled voices challenging the BJP's majoritarianism has been Krishnan's, whether it has been cow vigilantes [lynching](#) Muslims, the [crackdown](#) on critical journalists, [human rights violations](#) in Kashmir, and passage of a law [excluding](#) only undocumented Muslims from Indian citizenship.

If they were [criticising](#) how facial recognition technology was being [used](#) in India to target predominantly Muslim protesters, how could her party be quiet about China using it to profile the [Uighurs](#) and [Tibetans](#)?

If they had criticised the United States over the invasion of Iraq, why was the Left stingy in condemning Russia's invasion of Ukraine, even though Iraq was run by Saddam Hussein, a dictator who [used](#) mustard gas and sarin against Kurds in his country, while Volodymyr Zelensky was a democratically elected leader.

It was this compulsion only to condemn the US, capitalist imperialism and the western media and writers when superpowers like China and Russia were also committing massive human rights violations against their citizens and in other countries, which Krishnan could no longer make her peace with.

Noting her admiration for the Americans who call out American imperialism, Krishnan asked why the Left felt so threatened by people who were critical of its history and politics.

“Politics of transformation should be based on reality and acknowledgement of truths. You don’t fit your reality into your ideological framework,” said Krishnan. “That has to be written in big letters on our brains.”

“There is a certain ideological framework, a certain kind of schooling of their mind, which is standing in the way of their understanding. That is not malice on their part,” she said. “It is my fault that I could not explain it. I know their blind spots, but I could not get past them. I thought I could, but I failed.”

The Meaning Of Comrade

All smiles while speaking of her days in JNU and joining AISA with her friends, Krishnan recalled them being a motley crew committed to fighting injustice but far less organised than the other Left-wing student group on campus, the [Students’ Federation of India](#) (SFI).

While there were days when the pursuit of justice took a backseat to the love stories and heartbreaks in their young lives, it was with these AISA people that Krishnan felt she could live her life as a bisexual woman embracing socialism.

Her mother, Lakshmi Krishnan, a teacher and far more political than her father, knew that Krishnan liked women before she did but waited for her to realise on her own. Calling her mother an “iconoclast”, Krishnan said she raised her two daughters to be unshackled by sexual morality.

In 2016, in response to someone who was trolling Krishnan in a post about consensual sex, Lakshmi Krishnan [responded](#), “Hi GM Das! I am Kavita’s mother. Of course, I had free sex. I should jolly well hope so! As and when I wanted, with the person I wanted. And I fight for every woman and man to have sex according to their consent. Never unfree, never forced.”

Krishnan’s future husband, Tapas Ranjan Saha, who came from the SFI and was shocked at the state of disarray inside AISA, not only helped the student activists get organised but impressed upon them the importance of organisation in mass movements.

Krishnan didn’t know she had [ADHD](#) at the time but knew she performed well under pressure but could not focus on one thing long enough to plan for the long term. She knew that if she chose politics, it would become an all-consuming lifelong pursuit.

“The first time I heard ‘comrade’ was in JNU. I was such a private person then. I just wanted to have two or three friends,” said Krishnan. “It was the AISA people who teased me out of my shell.”

“Coming into public life would have been very difficult for me had it not been for these people who were so generous with their time and lives for the silly troubles of so many people,” said Krishnan. “Building an organisation is care work, family work. You are caring for people in all they are going through. Eventually, I learnt comradeship is just having the patience to listen.”

"I feel like a fish out of water now. I'm quite heartbroken. So many comrades are friends. I don't want a distance between us," she said. "When people call, I say, 'You are still a comrade. I am always a comrade.'"

Feminist Speak

A leader of AISA, then the [All India Progressive Women's Association](#) (AIPWA), the women's wing of her party, a member of its politburo and editor of its newsletter, *Liberation*, Krishnan was 39 when she gave a 12-minute [speech](#) outside then Delhi chief minister Sheila Dikshit's residence during the anti-rape protests in December 2012. The speech went viral, making her known outside the Left circle.

The 23-year-old physiotherapy student, who was gang raped on 16 December, was returning from a late-night movie with a male friend and had boarded a private bus where she was raped by four men and a minor, and brutalised with an iron rod when she fought back.

Speaking minutes after the Delhi police turned water cannons on the protesters, Krishnan said women had the right to feel safe irrespective of what they wore when they stepped out of the house and returned.

In her speech, Krishnan criticised Dikshit for [saying](#) that Soumya Viswanathan, the journalist who was murdered in Delhi four years earlier, was "adventurous" for having stepped out at three in the morning and BJP leader Sushma Swaraj for saying that if Nirbhaya were to live, she would be a "[living corpse](#)", and the Delhi ad campaign for women's safety where a famous movie star urges other men to be men and protect women. The solution lay in fighting these regressive views and toxic masculinity, not in CCTV cameras, the death penalty, chemical castration, curfews and male custodians.

"We have come to say that women have every right to be 'adventurous'. We will be adventurous. We will be reckless. We will be rash," said Krishnan.

"If girls want to go out late at night, no matter how late it is, they don't owe anyone a justification that they have to do it for work or if they are returning from work. If she feels like going out at night, if she wants to go out and have a cigarette, walk on the road at night, this is not a crime," she said.

On the nightly news, where debates were hijacked by people speaking of the death penalty for rapists and raising the age of consent, Krishnan said the state killing people was no deterrent and criminalising sex between young people did nothing other than policing teenagers, particularly the girls, interfaith and inter-caste couples.

Recalling some of the things she said during the protests, Krishnan said her party's recent intransigence took her by surprise because they had stood by her even when she may have jumped the gun on some issues. Opposing the death penalty in 2012, for instance, was something she did before her party made up its mind, but no one stopped her from speaking up.

Even when she spoke with women party workers about how judging women through the lens of sexual morality was a win for patriarchy, Krishnan said she encountered curiosity, openness and room for discussion. These women did the real work of socialism at the grassroots but still believed "good women" behaved in a certain way, but they were willing to listen to someone they saw working very hard for the party.

"It is not just information, but imagination and what you do with that information in your

imagination,” she said.

Making History

Minutes before she gave her now-famous speech, Krishnan recalled the young journalist who came up to her to ask, “People say the onus is on women not to go out at night so as to keep safe; but what must nurses and journalists do, whose work requires them to go out at night?”

“Her expression, feeling of pressure, her defensive need to offer a legitimate purpose to go out at night—we have to go out—it rankled,” she said.

Still drenched from the blast of the water cannon, Krishnan poured the anger she felt at the moment into her words.

In the days that followed, the speech went viral, and Krishnan recalled being inundated with messages from young women saying they were under tremendous pressure from family members imposing all manners of curfews and restrictions after the horrific rape, reversing hard-fought-for freedoms.

Recognising the gravity of the moment and her role in it, Krishnan was campaigning around the clock, living in the party office, with her old mobile phone creaking under the weight of the messages of solidarity and invitations to speak that came flooding in. Determined to use every opportunity to put forward the feminist response to the horrific gang rape, Krishnan said how small or big the news outlet was made no difference to her.

While she campaigned “*bahut dil se*” (from the heart), Krishnan said her message was amplified because of the efforts made by university students in Delhi to organise the protests and keep them going.

“I think back now and wonder what I was doing in those days. The media had gone crazy, and I thought it was my duty to go and argue the right thing everywhere. I just felt that if I’m getting the space, I must do it,” said Krishnan. “The ability to be able to offer some feminist insight and get people to rally around and not just have blind anger against the incident was made possible by the student groups organising the campaign.”

Then, one day, her friends and colleagues intervened and got her a new phone—an early model of the Samsung smartphone—to help her manage the deluge of messages. On her birthday, her husband came and took her out for dinner and shopping for clothes.

Laughing out loud, Krishnan said, “There was this shawl that I wore every night on every TV debate. There was this joke: if I ever run for election, it could be my symbol.”

Making Law

The 2012 gang rape was the first time Krishnan lobbied for legislation changes.

Krishnan recalled meeting with women lawmakers from across party lines, including BJP leaders like Sushma Swaraj, Smriti Irani, and DMK’s ([Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam](#)) Kanimozhi Karunanidhi. She found they were more or less on the same page regarding opposing solutions that would extend the state’s control over women.

Holding poor governance and policing responsible for how dangerous India was for women, the [Justice J.S. Verma Committee](#) expanded the definition of rape, including marital rape, but did not

give in to the clamour for the death penalty.

While the definition of rape in the new law was expanded from peno-vaginal penetration to other penetrative and non-penetrative sexual assaults, the new anti-rape law, passed when the [Congress Party](#) government was in power in 2013, went against feminist opinion and the Verma Committee recommendations by raising the age of consent from 16 to 18, introducing the death penalty for heinous cases of rape, and did not recognise marital rape as a crime.

“The Justice Verma committee listened to feminists. That made a huge difference to the Verma report. The whole notion of rape was lifted out of morality and placed firmly in the language of consent,” said Krishnan.

“The educational experience about law making was that making laws in a hurry and the political glare is not a good idea. Even sensible people who understood the damage of lowering the age of consent had to shut up.”

Extraordinary Moments

While she was, for the course of the anti-rape protests, a staple for the news channels, Krishnan recalled her first time appearing on television was months earlier, when a Dalit girl was [gang raped](#) in Haryana in September 2012. The debate was on Times Now, with Arnab Goswami hosting. Except for Barkha Dutt, Krishnan said she did not know any other journalist and rarely watched the television news at the time.

As the show went on, Krishnan found herself in the unusual position of defending the police officer on the show from Goswami’s line of attack, which she found unnecessary and unhelpful, given that the delay in registering the first information report (FIR) was in part caused by the survivor’s delay in reporting the crime. When she did, her father killed himself.

When she went to Hisar to find out more, Krishnan recalled meeting the police officer, who she said turned out to be an “unusual cop”; an OBC (Other Backward Classes) man from Tamil Nadu whose father was a factory worker from Coimbatore and a Left party supporter. He was married to a Dalit woman from his home state.

The officer, Krishnan learnt, met with Dalit boys and girls and helped the boys realise how they felt entitled to set limits on the autonomy of the Dalit girls, just as men from the dominant castes felt entitled to set limits on the autonomy of Dalit boys.

His wife, she recalled, while whipping them up some rice with paste and papad, thanked her for saving her husband from Goswami.

“We wanted to find out who you were because we saw when an unfair accusation was made, you stood up for him. You did not allow him to be attacked for something that was not his fault,” she recalled his wife saying.

Sanitary Pads & Beedis

Jailed for the first time in 1999 following a JNUSU protest on campus, Krishnan said she and a friend, the only two women arrested, spent a week inside the Tihar jail in Delhi.

They found most of the other women were jailed for dowry-related crimes. They befriended the wife of a gangster who was arrested for trying to take a gun from a policeman and making her escape. The gangster was dead, and she wanted their help

writing a letter to one of his friends she was interested in.

She was, however, not happy with what they wrote and told them they had made it sound more familial than romantic, Krishnan said, laughing as she recalled her refrain: "*Arre beta bana diya*" (You have made him my son).

In 2002, Krishnan said then chief minister Mayawati arrested the women from all over eastern Uttar Pradesh who had gathered in Ayodhya to mark the first war of independence (1857) and protested the communal riots in Gujarat earlier that year.

She and a large contingent of women were dispatched to Mau, where they "sang songs and raised Cain" for a week. When inmates were on their period, Krishnan said they demanded sanitary napkins even though many of the women did not wear underwear and used cloth instead of only pads. They even managed to get *beedis* inside the jail.

When she was jailed in 2007 for missing a court hearing concerning a protest years earlier, Krishnan said it was her first time alone. This time, she befriended a young Rajput woman who was accused of strangling her baby girl minutes after she was born and was in a terrible way mentally and physically.

One day, as Krishnan helped the woman cross the courtyard, the jail warden, a woman who wore many rings, slapped her across the face.

Losing her temper and screaming at the warden, Krishnan said a Nigerian prisoner pacified her.

Later, after the warden realised she was speaking with an educated woman, Krishnan said she asked her to spy on other inmates for her. She refused. When the warden hit back by confining all the women prisoners to the barracks, Krishnan feared they would be very angry with her. Instead, they admired her for standing her ground.

Many were part of the prison uprising after an Afghan woman named Zohra, who a jail matron reportedly beat, [died](#) due to medical negligence.

Having recently discovered the Netflix show '[Orange Is The New Black](#)' about women inmates in America, Krishnan said there were many things that resonate.

Regression On Rights

After the BJP came to power and attacks on Indian Muslims started becoming more frequent and brazen, Krishnan took to Twitter, calling out the anti-Muslim radicalisation, even as many political leaders swayed by the majoritarian sentiment fell silent. As she amassed lakhs of followers, right-wing trolls came after her with threats and insults, even making fun of her skin tone. The men's rights trolls joined the fray during the Me Too movement.

Krishnan said that the right-wing trolls were bothersome but nothing she couldn't handle. But she was rattled by people she considered allies, who came after her for calling out men like former *Tehelka* editor-in-chief [Tarun Tejpal](#) and Mohammed [Farooqui](#) (both men were acquitted of rape charges). The blame game after a social worker [Khurshid Anwar](#), accused of rape, killed himself was devastating to her.

Eventually, the trolling led to a depressive episode. While her friends, sister and mother were there for her, Krishnan sought professional help.

“All this ‘*kalmoohee*’ stuff doesn’t bother me. Growing up, I was never made conscious of my skin. When I started having relationships, I met men and women who did not bother about skin tone or hair on the body,” said Krishnan, laughing. “These trolls said I looked like a *hijra*. They were very curious about my husband, saying he must wash clothes, do the *bartans* (utensils), and cook the food. I told Tapas, ‘how do they know?’”

“Some of the worst perpetrators have been the so-called progressives, people I know—anti-feminist scum. I was appalled,” she said. “When it comes from my circles, I just felt they should know me and that I’m a fair person. I couldn’t get out of bed for a week. I did not have a handle on my emotions. I learnt a lot from my friend Vrinda Grover. She has very thick skin.”

Looking back at the 2012 Delhi gang rape to the MeToo movement to the present day, Krishnan said the arc of women’s rights had waned.

On the one hand, there was the birth of movements like [Pinjra Tod](#), a women’s collective that campaigned against restrictions put on women students in the name of protecting them. On the other, “love jihad” (a baseless conspiracy theory about Muslim men lying about their identity to marry Hindu women and convert them to Islam) was being used for communal politics, and people were cheering the early release of rapists.

“A woman is either a dangerous figure or someone who needs to be saved,” she said. “It is a terrible state of affairs for women’s autonomy and assertion.”

Noting that she does not go on television debates anymore, Krishnan said, “In 2012-2013, there was the scope of making a feminist argument. It doesn’t exist anymore. The space for debate is filled with reactionary groups establishing some kind of right-wing consensus.”

The Age Of Innocence

They lived in Bhilai, Chattisgarh, where her father worked as an engineer in a steel plant, a joint venture between India and the erstwhile USSR. He would tell them how the Russian engineers ate their meals with the factory workers. Her mother, who voted for members of the Chhattisgarh Mukti Morcha, would teach English for free to anyone who wanted to learn. They were nothing like other families of the Tamil Brahmin community.

When an acquaintance in Bhilai told her father not to let her stay in the Ganga hostel in JNU, saying it was a hub of women with loose morals, Krishnan recalled wondering how her father would react when he came to drop her. Except for playing with a black cat while waiting for her to unpack her belongings, Krishnan said there was nothing much else her father said or did.

Krishnan recalled her grandfather, a retired journalist and editor at the time, had a radio where she heard Rajiv Gandhi’s infamous [remark](#) about the ground shaking when a big tree falls; his explanation for the murder of hundreds of Sikhs by Hindus mobs, instigated by Congress leaders, following the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi on 31 October 1984.

When she went to study English at St Xavier’s college in Mumbai, Krishnan was still apolitical.

The day riots erupted in the city after the Babri Masjid was demolished 1,500 km away in Ayodhya, Krishnan recalled it was sari day in her college. She was excited about the cream-coloured one her best friend had given her. While setting off, she never imagined that she would have to come scurrying back as orange flames and dark smoke billowed into the sky.

But the incident that left an indelible impression on her happened a month later as she and a friend crossed the street with one of their favourite professors. The latter remarked that if Muslims wanted to live in India, they would have to behave.

“We just hung back in silence and shock,” she said. “It was the first time something like this happened. It felt like the time of innocence was ending.”

A Democratic Force

The Left today was the most democratic force in India, but not without its flaws, said Krishnan.

Referring to the [Marichjhapi massacre](#) of Dalit refugees in 1979, two years after the Left front came to power in West Bengal, Krishnan said the CPM had been a repressive force in the state.

In Kerala, Krishnan said the CPM government [used](#) the draconian [Unlawful Activities Prevention Act 1967](#), engaged in [custodial torture](#) of suspected [Maoists](#), and never questioned the use of Aadhar as a massive violation of privacy.

But if they raised these issues, Krishnan said they were told to first come to power and then have an opinion. Winning elections was incredibly difficult for the cash-strapped party, which she recalled would often have fewer resources than even individual candidates standing as a proxy for the larger parties.

“I feel like saying, ‘your arrogance prevents you from strengthening the Left in India’ but a lot of jeering comes our way. ‘You guys win an election and show,’ is what we heard all the time,” she said, referring to the CPI (ML) as her party. “Every electoral victory would be so hard-fought.”

Laughing, Krishnan added, “The [EC](#) wouldn’t believe our spending amount was so low. We used to be very ashamed of submitting low expenditure amounts.”

In the 2020 state election in Bihar, however, of the 19 seats won by a resurgent left front, CPI-ML won 12. In 2015, CPI-ML won three. In Jharkhand, the party’s one MLA was re-elected in 2019 from Giridih district.

Recalling the Ranvir Sena (a private militia of upper caste landowners), which was formed to wipe out the CPI (ML) from central Bihar in 1994, and the [assassination](#) of Chandrashekhara Prasad, aka Chandu, a popular student leader and another activist Shyam Narain Yadav in Siwan in March 1997, Krishnan said, “The party’s very survival is a miracle. It has survived against all odds.”

“The Left is the most democratic force we have in India right now,” she said. “A new generation of people has the ML in their life as a democratising force. It is amazing.”

Was it true though, that some of the bold positions they were able to take, like their support for the political prisoners of the Modi government, opposition to Hindu majoritarianism, and calling out human rights violations in Kashmir, were because they did not have as much as stake electorally as other opposition parties including their communist counterparts?

They had spoken against the CAA, and for the mostly Muslim political prisoners following the Delhi riots in every public meeting during the Bihar Assembly Election campaign in 2020, Krishnan responded, even as Uttar Pradesh chief minister Yogi Adityanath said they were spreading “terrorism, Naxalism, extremism and separatism”.

For now, however, CPI (ML) is no longer Krishnan's party. But she intends to let this have no bearing on her activism.

"I want to continue to respond to the grave situations that we are in and to the assault of the Hindu supremacist right," she said.

Betwa Sharma

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P.S.

Article 14

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