

India: I am fighting for democracy: Kavita Krishnan on why she quit CPI (ML)

Monday 5 September 2022, by [JOHNY K A](#) (Date first published: 3 September 2022).

Kavita Krishnan, politburo member of CPI(ML), announced in her FB post on Thursday that she has quit the party. She has made it clear that she took the decision because of certain troubling political questions which makes her resignation inevitable. She has found it impossible to continue in the context of “defending liberal democracies with all their flaws against rising forms of authoritarian and majoritarian populisms”. Kavita spoke to Mathrubhumi about the reasons that led to the decision and what it means to her in the journey forward. Excerpts:

Your announcement has surprised and shocked your friends and colleagues. What has led to this decision?

Actually, I have been thinking about this for several years, about the way we fight for civil liberties and democratic rights in India. So, as we fight here, we know that whatever democratic structure India has, it has a lot of flaws. The poor are constantly at the mercy of the police, so too the media and society as they have so much power. Torture is ubiquitous and you think about how to protect the citizens from the power of the state. Secondly, you have a situation here since 2014, where democracy with all its flaws, is under attack from a completely fascist, totalitarian system. BJP openly says they want one nation, one party. They want an opposition mukth India. So we are fighting that now. And then, of course, we are trying to defend whatever flawed democracy we have. And we are also trying to think of what a better, more democratic India may look like tomorrow.

As you point out, we are not living in a perfect democratic world. But that doesn't mean that totalitarian regimes are the answer. So, the fight for democracy demands that there can't be any compromise with totalitarian ideology?

Yes. We have to stand up and fight against totalitarianism and authoritarianism. In the course of thinking about that I naturally began to read very widely about authoritarian and totalitarian regimes in general. It starts with reading about Hitler. But if you read about Eastern Europe, you are forced to see that in the 1930s and 40s, those societies, those countries faced terrible repression, first from the Stalin regime, and then from the Hitler regime. The regimes are ideologically very different. Those regions were facing these really terrible state-sponsored crimes. And then I was struck by the need to think about how we understand democracy and its relationship with any state, even socialist states. How can you have a socialist state that does not have basic democratic rights? People need food but without justice and liberty life becomes meaningless.

Your point of view reminds one of Rosa Luxemburg's famous statement that the most significant right is the right to dissent. Without the right to dissent, the right to disagree, no system can be called progressive, liberal and democratic?

Absolutely. The point is that I'm not just talking about fascist regimes or socialists. I'm saying even a

simple thing in India, you take women's empowerment policy. For example the campaign for toilets. No doubt, it's a good thing from a health point of view. But if you start chasing people, scaring them while they are using the fields as a toilet, you are shaming them and terrorising them. It has happened in all states including Congress ruled ones. Now that means imposition of even a good policy undemocratically does more damage than good. So you cannot say that the means justify the end. It doesn't work if you can't find a democratic way to do it. It's all about democracy.

Mao, the Chinese leader was for a hundred flowers of thoughts in the beginning. But ultimately he allowed only his own thoughts. That is the irony with the totalitarian regimes. Pretension is the narrative. You talk of one thing and practise the opposite?

Precisely. You start with good intentions but end up having contrary goals. And you have mass starvation negation of civil liberties in the process. Then you go on justifying all these crimes in terms of the goals. This reality has been troubling me for quite some time. Differences of opinion cannot be suppressed. You must be ready to accept realities.

Let me quote from your FB post : "This is totalitarianism not 'socialism' in any sense that Marx meant it. China is a dystopian nightmare. If any Indian communist thinks it's ok for 'communists' to rule like this, then they should ask themselves what kind of democracy they're fighting for in India? You are making it crystal clear that without liberty, without freedom of thought, the regimes in China and Russia fail to be model republics?"

Yes, let me frame it in a Marxist way. We all know that these countries are building capitalism in their own way. In capitalist countries people are allowed some sort of freedom because the regimes feel that it is good for their own existence. The working classes in these societies make use of these freedoms to fight for the causes they believe, to better their living conditions. But in the socialist countries the working classes don't even have this freedom. No independent union activities are allowed without the government's approval. It is really capitalism under one party rule.

So you're demanding some kind of introspection, soul search within the communist movements in India?

I don't intend to have a polemic or a debate with the communist movements in India alone. I think that these are things for everybody who is concerned about the state of the world today. I come from a Marxist background. But I think that we need to think of ways where we are not thinking in formulas. We should be able to admit that we may have been wrong at some point on some things that were right, or that we were right about something which are no longer right today. I don't have the answers to these. But I think that at least facing the questions, framing the questions, and being more concerned about how to really create more sturdy democracies, should be the concern today. Because, otherwise we will all be washed away. And what worries me, what scares me is the degree to which people on the left, all over the world, by the way, not just in India are influenced by the Putin propaganda. Putin is a fascist. Even Chomsky is falling for Putin propaganda. Chomsky is saying admiring things about Donald Trump because Trump said something positive about Putin. This is shocking.

You have raised serious concern over the Putin propaganda about the Ukraine war. The Ukraine war brings back the memories of Vietnam. It seems Russia has found its Vietnam moment in Ukraine?

Yeah, I hope so. What I'm worried about is when leftists start thinking that Russia must be supported because Ukraine is backed by America and America is the enemy of Russia. That is rubbish. I mean, Hitler was an opponent of the British colonial state. But we recognised even then

that Hitler was a bigger threat.

What has been the response to your decision? How has the party taken it?

Comrades in the ML are very sad and even I'm very sad. I can't blame them. So there is a great deal of sadness. And I'm happy that there is no sense of enmity or competition with comrades in the ML. They will always be my closest friends and my comrades. Most of them feel that I could have done this within the party but had that been possible I would have definitely remained in the party.

Why do you think that it is not possible to continue the fight while still remaining within the party?

I wish it had been possible. I felt I cannot postpone these discussions indefinitely now. This is not a debate about Stalin. It's about acknowledging the effects of the Stalin regime, which are with us today. Acknowledging the effects of China's authoritarian regime which is next door to India. When China is putting Uyghur Muslims in concentration camps in the name of War on Terror - and Muslims in India too are facing violence and the threat of "detention camps" by the Hindu-supremacist state, can we afford not to join the dots and make the connections? Can we ignore that the Modi regime is following in China's path to use facial recognition technology to surveil protestors?

What are your future plans?

Nothing much, except I'm planning to write, I'm planning to do some podcasts and find a platform to think and speak for some time. Right now, I will be an individual only. I don't plan to join any party or formation. Definitely, I will not be joining Congress or TMC. No such plans exists as far as I am concerned. I'm more or less thinking right now about just having time to think about these thoughts. Meanwhile, continue the fight for democracy in India. That is our primary job.

K Venu, who led the Naxal movement in Kerala, has been raising these thoughts for quite sometime. Have you ever had any interactions with him in this regard?

No. I would like to read his books if they are available in English. Of course, I would like to have some interactions with him in the coming days.

K A Johny

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