Ukraine and the Indian Left

written by Rohini Hensman | August 17, 2023

Kavita Krishnan, a Marxist feminist who had been for three decades a member of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation, a member of the Politbureau, leader of its women's wing (the All-India Progressive Women's Association) and a prominent spokesperson of the party, suddenly quit these posts and the party itself in early September 2022. Many admirers were unclear about what had happened and why, although from her subsequent statements and articles it became clear that the reason was a disagreement with the party's position on the war in Ukraine.

On April 10, 2023, she was interviewed by Rohini Hensman on her departure from the party and her differences with it.

Rohini Hensman: As the spokesperson of the Communist Party of India (Marxist-Leninist) Liberation and of its women›s wing AIPWA, you had the privilege of being widely reported when you took positions that were shared by many socialists and feminists. Can you explain what made you resign from this position?

Kavita Krishnan: The differences with the CPIML, to which I had belonged for three decades, came to the fore following the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. I did not actually intend to resign from leadership positions in the party or AIPWA. To begin with, I had been sure that there was room in the party to openly debate the approach to the Ukraine war, and to acknowledge and analyze the growing convergence between anti-democratic political projects as articulated by Putin, Trump, Xi Jinping, Modi, and many others. It became clear that my confidence was misplaced when the party told me I couldn't remain a party leader if I wrote anything expressing my views on this subject, whether in the party magazine or outside it. I had assumed that I could remain a party member—and did not in fact realize I had lost my membership until two days after the fact.

The party leadership's position was that the invasion of Ukraine was a remote event, requiring nothing but a token statement condemning Russia's invasion and stating solidarity with Ukraine—while emphasizing the alleged United States and NATO role in creating the conflict and then perpetuating it.

They also said the left cannot "identify with" Ukraine and advocate for its victory as we did with Vietnam (or even Afghanistan or Iraq). The reason? The latter were resisting the U.S., which is the foremost imperialist power. We could not advocate for an outright defeat for Russia at the hands of Ukraine, because such a defeat would weaken Russia as a "multipolar" power challenging U.S. hegemony.

Their position was that "regardless of the internal character" of the governments of Russia and China, the left must welcome them as powers that enable a "multipolar world."[1] Any wider discussion of this question, they felt, was a distraction from the "national priority" of resisting

Modi's fascist policies in India.

RH: So, what were your arguments for why the left should support Ukraine in the ongoing war, including supporting their request for arms?

KK: I had argued that we should support any resistance to injustice, regardless of what relationship that state had to the U.S., and that our solidarity should be for the survival and victory of struggling people resisting injustice—not for the survival of despotic states whose only merit is that they are not the U.S. I was very distressed that instead of countering Putinist disinformation that flooded the public sphere in India, the party was rehabilitating such propaganda even in its own publications.

For instance, an editorial in our weekly publication said that in annexing Crimea in 2014, Putin was "retaliating" for the "toppling of the elected Yanukovych regime" by the U.S.[2] This was published, overriding my strenuous efforts to present facts on the Maidan revolution. I was eventually allowed to write a single signed article on Ukraine in our party magazine[3]—but it was made clear that this opportunity would not happen again.

RH: Internationalism is a key tenet of revolutionary socialism. How do you respond to Indian left parties terming the question of Ukraine an "international" one, and therefore not a priority for the left in India?

KK: My central argument with my party was in fact that Russia's invasion of Ukraine was not a remote issue—its outcomes would have profound consequences for India and the world, indeed, for the survival of the planet. Events since have only affirmed the validity of my concerns.

Let me explain. We know that Narendra Modi's rise was paralleled by the rise of businessman Gautam Adani, and that any analysis of Modi's politics is inseparable from an analysis of his crony capitalists, foremost among them being Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani.

The Hindenburg report has revealed that Adani's business empire stands on a foundation of brazen fraud. The Adani empire had transactions with VTB, the Russian state-owned bank popularly called "Putin's piggybank."[4] A member of parliament from the Congress Party, Jairam Ramesh, drew attention to VTB's role in a deal reportedly supervised personally by Putin and Modi, where four Indian public sector units paid an inflated price for a 49.9% stake in a subsidiary of Russian energy giant Rosneft, which bought up a Gujarat-based oil refinery from Essar for at least twice as much as it was worth. He commented on "a suspicious pattern in which public sector units overpay a Russian firm for an oil asset, which, in turn, overpays a politically-connected private Indian firm for another energy asset."[5]

Former U.S. President Donald Trump and his associates have also been investigated for conflicts of interest arising from their dealings involving VTB and another Russian bank Sberbank, associated with Russian oligarchs.[6] A Chinese businessman is closely involved in the dubious transactions of members of the Adani family and business empire, and implicated in Adani's coal procurement scams as well as allegations of Adani's violation of UN sanctions to sell petroleum products to North Korea.[7] There is another company, Elara Capital, with links to Mauritius and London, including Jo Johnson, a British MP and brother of former PM Boris Johnson, who is a co-owner of an Adani defense firm.[8]

In India, opposition parties have predictably framed their questions about Modi crony Adani's transactions involving individuals and state-owned entities in Russia, China, and North Korea in terms of the implications for India's national security, as well as for public sector assets including banks, which in turn affect the savings of ordinary Indians. At the time of this interview, Indian Left

parties have conspicuously avoided any acknowledgement of Russian, Chinese, or North Korean linkages with the Adani scam, only mentioning Elara Capital, linked with London and Mauritius and the UK's Conservative Party.[9]

Another close crony of Modi's is the tycoon, Mukesh Ambani. Since the invasion and the sanctions imposed by the United States and its European allies on Russia, India has become one of the biggest buyers of Russian oil.[10] Who in India is actually profiting from these transactions? According to a report, "Nearly three-quarters of cheap Russian oil is bought by private refiners, [Mukesh Ambani's] Reliance Industries and Russia-controlled Nayara Energy."[11] Essentially, these companies make millions laundering Russian crude which they then sell to the United States and European countries that imposed the sanctions in the first place.[12]

Fossil-fuel oligarchs are at the heart of authoritarianisms worldwide, and these in turn are the reason the earth is hurtling to destruction. Modi's power rests on his two cronies Mukesh Ambani and Gautam Adani: both fossil-fuel oligarchs, one profiting from the invasion of Ukraine and the other with deep links to dubious Russian and Chinese financial entities.[13] Russia is a fossil-fuel oligarchy, with Putin the biggest oligarch of them all. Authoritarian rulers, politicians, business tycoons, and oligarchs—including those in the U.S., Russia, Europe, Saudi Arabia, China, and India—are part of a global financial and political web with fossil fuels at their center. There is growing evidence of cooperation among far-right and authoritarian forces as part of a shared political project to discredit and dismantle the very concept of some minimum democratic values and standards that are universally accepted in principle.[14] The foremost ideologue of this project is Russian fascist Aleksandr Dugin.[15] It is startling to find that Dugin as well as American and European far-right figures invoke the same moral panic over "Kaliyuga" (the overturning of caste/gender hierarchies and the resulting miscegenation—mixture of castes—of which unnatural and monstrous beings are born) that has a prominent place in Hindu-supremacist ideology.[16] Dugin has global connections, including to Chinese state universities and think-tanks, American far-right politics, a liberal Indian journal as well as Hindu supremacists.

How does the Indian left explain the rise of the global far-right and its relationship with the rise of Modi? They say that "global capitalism is mired in deep crisis and uncertainty and it is seeking a way out of this crisis through war and fascist consolidation and thorough undermining of bourgeois democracy";[17] that "the current phase of fascism has emerged in a context of global neoliberalism;"[18] that Adani and Ambani are "homegrown billionaire capitalists … deeply integrated with imperialism" and an expression of crony capitalism "which Vladimir Ilyich Lenin had defined as the economic essence of the imperialist stage of capitalism."[19]

Are these timeless generalities adequate to describe, let alone explain the political economy of the rise of global authoritarian and far-right politics, and its relationship with the political economy of Hindu supremacist politics in India? I find it incredible that the CPIML and other Indian left parties should speak of the "national priority" of fighting fascism in India, while shutting their eyes and stopping their ears to any specific, concrete evidence that sheds light on the political economy of fascism in India, for fear that it might challenge formulas from a century ago that they hold dear.

RH: You do not, then, agree with those who say that this is a proxy war started by the United States and NATO using Ukraine to rebuild their hegemony, and therefore support for Ukraine is actually support for unipolar U.S. imperialism?

KK: For me, the invasion of Ukraine was the catalyst that brought long-simmering concerns and questions together with a blinding clarity, and I could suddenly see them as they are, with all their interconnections, shining a light on exactly how our world has changed.

Geopolitics (especially in its Realist avatar of "polarity" that has become common sense on the political Right, Left, and Center) is a distorting lens which prevents us from seeing political changes in the world. It is marked by the growing convergence of global and Indian anti-democratic projects (and their leaders and ideologues), projects backed by fossil-fuel oligarchies across countries and continents, that threaten the very survival of our planet. This ought to be our primary concern, rather than to protect an imaginary "multipolarity." Most of the global left, across the range of its diverse streams, is speaking a language of "multipolarity" which is hard to distinguish from that shared by global despots like Putin, Xi, and Modi, and their ideologues like the RSS (the right-wing Hindu supremacist paramilitary organization) and Dugin, and their anti-democratic projects.

The burden of these despotic arguments is that minimum standards and values of democracy, human rights, and civil liberties are the ideology of a tiny but powerful Western elite, which they set up as "universal" and with characteristic imperialist arrogance seek to impose on the majority of people in the Western countries as well as the rest of the world. The majority, they claim, in Western countries as well as the rest of the world are waging a freedom movement to throw off the yoke of values imposed by an elite liberal "unipolar" and unilateral clique—values which defy the god-ordained laws of nature and the natural hierarchical order. Such resistance is punished by the Western elite with "cancel culture," which in the case of "civilizational states" takes the shape of sanctions and finger-wagging on democracy and rights. But, they claim, the world will surely liberate itself from liberal hegemony dictated by unipolar Western power—and establish instead a multipolar world.

Prominent figures on the Indian and international left make arguments that are disturbingly similar.

In the April 2020 issue of the Indian journal *Seminar,* Aleksandr Dugin wrote that "The multipolar world order [is] based on the principle of plurality of civilizations against the false pretensions of so-called 'universality' of 'western values' and 'inevitability' of the western way of progress and development." He also described Modi's rise as a multipolar triumph.

China's President Xi Jinping wrote, "The United States and other Western countries … package values of freedom, democracy, and human rights as 'universal values' and promote them globally to confuse people." (*People's Daily*, September 02, 2021)[20]

In a Joint Russia-China statement issued in Beijing on February 4, 2022, a short while before the invasion of Ukraine, President Xi Jinping and President Vladimir Putin said,

> [We] call on the international community to respect cultural and civilizational diversity. Every nation has its own unique national features, history, culture, social system and level of social and economic development, human rights should be protected in accordance with the specific situation in each country and the needs of its population.[21]

S Jaishankar, BJP leader and Minister for External Affairs, Government of India, said, "Each country approaches issues of democracy, governance and human rights from their history, tradition and societal context. We do not believe the efficacy or the quality of democracy should be decided by others" (Washington, September 28, 2022).[22]

Vijay Prashad, a prominent figure on the international left, said in a talk posted on YouTube on September 30, 2022,

> Why is the U.S. so threatened by the idea of multi-polarity? It's extraordinary, this kind of messianic sense that U.S. values need to be spread around the world because they are superior to all other values. This idea that other people cannot govern themselves, that the U.S. must generalize its values all over the planet—this arrogance comes from this evangelical

> belief that U.S. values are better, and everybody must conform to the U.S. system. Multipolarity [is a] threat to this U.S.-dominated "rules-based order" as they like to call it.[23]

The statements above come from persons that identify as "left" as well as those who identify as "right." They all make arguments that are disturbingly similar. They argue that minimum standards and values of democracy, human rights, and civil liberties are just the ideology of a tiny but powerful Western elite, which they set up as "universal" and with characteristic imperialist arrogance, seek to impose on the majority of people in the Western countries as well as the rest of the world. Rulers should get to define "democracy" and "human rights" in keeping with values specific to their country or civilization, rather than answer to a "rules-based order" where the rules are based on the values of the United States.

In short, despots like Trump in America, Putin in Russia, Xi in China, and Modi in India describe multipolarity as their prerogative to determine and enforce the internal character of their nations and spheres of influence, regardless of any broad "universal" standards of democracy, rights, and liberties. And the left feels obligated to protect "multipolar" regimes (a euphemism for regimes seen to be hostile to the U.S.) "regardless of their internal character."[24]

RH: What is your response to people on the left who criticize your position as one that has abandoned socialist goals in favor of liberal democracy, such as the "universal standards of democracy and human rights" which you defend?

KK: The minimum standards of democracy, rights, and entitlements—and the legal obligation of states to comply with those standards—were never gifted by "enlightened liberal" states and their ruling classes. They were wrested from those rulers by courageous people's movements. Most people are attracted to left movements precisely because they have rightfully earned ethical credibility for their courage in defending justice even when such positions challenge majoritarian prejudices or passions as well as draconian state power, and doing so knowing that it will result in persecution.

The left has a paradoxical relationship with these standards. Socialists have been inseparable from many of these movements in many parts of the world, and have as a result suffered persecution ranging from political witch-hunts, criminalization of their very ideas, incarceration and execution for thought crimes, political assassinations, all the way to mass massacres of people for the crime of being socialists.

But states that have ruled in the name of socialism have rejected these standards as counterfeit, serving only to give capitalism a liberal mask. Claiming to be answerable not to these liberal pretensions but to a higher form of socialist democracy, these states proved to be among the most illiberal in modern history, notorious for political witch-hunts, criminalization, incarceration, execution, and massacres for thought-crimes or other equally arbitrary pretexts.

Left movements that disavow Stalinism have distanced themselves from the anti-democratic legacy of socialist states, arguing either that such states were never truly socialist or that such crimes were aberrations and mistakes, doubtless unfortunate and indefensible, but which cannot take away from the superior performance of such states on other democratic criteria—such as welfare measures for their citizens, support for colonial and post-colonial countries, or resistance to U.S. imperialism.

I think that both these arguments are disingenuous. Whether or to what degree such states were or are truly socialist is something socialist parties may argue over. But such arguments are something internal to socialist movements, and cannot in any way be the metric for defining or assessing such states.

We must assess and judge socialist states just as we assess and judge any other state. I think it's time we get rid of the question about which system or which form of state affords a better life and thus a better democracy to people. It's time to stop arguing about which form of state is more democratic. States are not where we should look for democracy. No form of state or government or economy is equivalent to democracy.

Democracy is not a form of state, fixed in form: it is a fluid process in which people argue, disagree, work together, to identify and fight for ever better democratic goals. So, the yardstick I favor to judge a country or society is: how free are people to fight for greater democracy? How free are people to set democratic goals for their society (disagreeing and arguing and making compromises and decisions in a messy and disorderly process) and fight for those goals?

A state that calls itself "socialist" may "provide" food, clothing, shelter but suppress and criminalize the right to organize, protest, dissent; it may disallow an independent press, judiciary, and opposition. Citizens in a capitalist state that calls itself a "liberal democracy" may be unable to actually avail themselves of the rights recognized by their constitution—the right to vote, stand for elections, organize, and have their voice be heard in the free press—because they are disenfranchised and dispossessed by structural inequality, poverty, oppression, and hunger.

Both states may have policies of mass incarceration and surveillance that are overtly or covertly racial.

Trying to measure which form of state is more democratic is pointless because the premise of such an exercise is false: it implies that we are willing to be satisfied with the state's own standards, and aim to defend that state or form of state. People who do not have to worry every day about food, clothing or shelter ought to be more free to organize, protest, question the state; in fact, to be the opposition without which no country can call itself a democracy.

People's struggles have forced capitalist states to formally recognize bare minimum standards of democracy, rights, and liberties; and this formal recognition is all that "liberal democracy" is. The thing is, people's struggles count those formal recognitions (universal adult suffrage, desegregation, the eight hour day, the right to unionize, protections from racial and caste-based dehumanization, for instance) as wins—because these give them stronger grounds to demand that the state be accountable to those standards.

China joins Russia in discrediting those bare minimum standards and refusing to acknowledge these as "universal standards." A report by a think-tank associated with the Chinese state, titled *Pursuing Common Values of Humanity — China's Approach to Democracy, Freedom and Human Rights*, says that "the Western notion of democracy characterized by competitive elections between multiple parties and the separation of three powers—executive, legislative, and judicial" results in "social disorder, political turmoil and repeated setbacks in economic and social development."[25] China, the report states, favors a model where democracy is defined as "good governance"—i.e. "where government, in the process of decision-making, should always keep in mind the interests of the overwhelming majority of the people, solicit and listen to the opinions of the people, serve the people." In China, the report states, "happiness is the ultimate standard of human rights." The report reproduced the Eight "Whether or Not" Criteria on Democracy listed by Xi Jinping: the rights to dissent, protest, organize, and challenge the government are absent from these criteria.

Some on the left like to describe the USSR—and China—as "state capitalist" and not socialist. The party to which I had belonged recently summed up its critical assessment of China with this comment: "the Chinese claim of building socialism with Chinese characteristics is increasingly becoming a euphemism for what should be described as capitalism with Chinese characteristics."[26]

These timid formulations seem to imagine they are daring ones. And they are just as absurd as claims that attack the concept of "healthcare for all" as a harbinger of totalitarian rule.

The truth is that China is "capitalism with totalitarian characteristics." Basic democratic standards in capitalist democracies have been won by "political turmoil" and "social disorder"—that is, by people's struggles. And it is these turbulent and disorderly struggles that continue to defend these hard-won democratic standards, rights, practices, and institutions that far-right and authoritarian forces are intent on demolishing. China's outright rejection of these standards does not just disqualify it as a "socialist state," it disqualifies it as a democracy, and qualifies it to be termed a totalitarian tyranny.

RH: Would you like to say anything about how you see your future, now that you are no longer in CPI(ML) Liberation?

KK: I am not certain of how I see my future. But I do see my present with great clarity. Ideologically and politically, I am, as always, committed to struggles for a more just and democratic world. And I believe that anyone who shares this commitment, must with the greatest urgency defend universal standards and values of democracy. Not because these standards and values represent the highest human aspirations—but because they are the *minimum* democratic qualifications. The acknowledgement of these minimum standards and values as "universal" has been wrested from the powerful by the struggles of the powerless all over the world. It has not been imposed by a coterie of "Western elites." There is no ceiling or cap on democracy—and if we reach for the sky, we must at the same time defend the democratic ground under our feet—*ground that we won*—from those that are rapidly eroding it.

Notes

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