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Caste, Mandal Commission and the Communist Party: In conversation with **Subhashini Ali**

A member of the Polit Bureau of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [(CPI(M)], Subhashini Ali has been a prominent face representing the Left in Indian politics for the last four decades. She was a Member of Parliament from 1989 to 1991, having been elected from Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh. She was part of the heated debates on caste and communal questions that took place in the parliament during this period. As an activist of the All India Democratic Women's Association (AIDWA), Subhashini Ali has been at the forefront of numerous struggles in defence of women's rights. She currently serves as the Vice-President of the organisation.

In her conversation with Nitheesh Narayanan of the Tricontinental, Subhashini Ali speaks on the debates over the Mandal Commission inside and outside the parliament as well as the Indian Left's understanding of caste-class relations and its long history of fighting caste oppression.

Nitheesh Narayanan (NN): You won the parliament election in 1989 and were a member of the Lok Sabha till 1991. Could you tell me something about the political atmosphere of the 1980s and the role played by the Left which culminated in your victory in one of the important centres of the Hindi heartland?

Subhashini Ali (SA): For us in Kanpur, which is an industrial city, the latter half of the 1980's was a time of great activity: strikes of Municipal Corporation employees, lawyers' struggle, textile workers movement culminating in the historic Rail Jam [blockade] of 110 hours. We played a prominent role in all of these.

This was a time of communal polarisation also. On the one hand, after the Supreme Court Judgment in the Shah Bano case, many Muslim organisations went on the offensive against this intervention in their personal laws. They were able to pressurise Rajiv Gandhi into bringing in a law that nullified the judgment. This was followed by the opening of the locks that had been placed by the court on the Babri Masjid.

Our Party had come out strongly in support of the SC judgment and we held many meetings of Muslim women all over Kanpur. We also criticised Rajiv Gandhi's opportunistic compromise, first with Muslim fundamentalist forces, and later with Hindu communal sentiments.

The BJP gained tremendous political momentum. On the one hand, their propaganda against both the Muslim community as anti-women and anti-Constitution, and against the Congress Party as a party of appeasers gained tremendous credibility. On the other hand, their campaign claiming the Babri Masjid site as the Ram Janmabhoomi [birthplace of the Hindu god Rama] received a tremendous boost when the locks were removed and lakhs of Hindu devotees descended on the site to offer pooja to Sri Ram. The Congress lost much of its support among both majority and minority communities.

With VP Singh's resignation from the Congress Government, the political situation in Uttar Pradesh and much of North India changed completely. The BJP came out in support of his campaign against corruption. VP Singh and his supporters who left the Congress with him formed the Janata Dal along with many groups of Socialists and Charan Singh supporters. Both the BJP and the Communist Parties supported the Janata Dal in the run-up to the Lok Sabha elections of December 1989.

In the elections, because of the many struggles that we had led in Kanpur, I contested as the CPI(M) candidate, supported by the Janata Dal. The BJP put up a candidate against me and also against the two CPI candidates in the State, Mitrasen Yadav and Ram Sajeevan. We [the Left] did not support their [the BJP's] candidates. It was an exciting campaign with all sections of society and huge numbers of young people supporting us and actually taking the responsibility of booths, public meetings etc. in their own hands. That is why we could win the election despite the fact that our Party had very limited strength in the city. Of course, the textile mills were open, and along with all other workers and employees, textile workers mobilised for us in a big way. This was possibly the last Lok Sabha election in UP and perhaps North India which was fought around livelihood issues. Even in this election, however, what was to become the hallmark of BJP electioneering and campaigning made its appearance. Their entire campaign against me was based on an untruth. I was accused of having said that a toilet should be constructed at the Babri Masjid site. This campaign became more and more shrill as voting day approached. BJP workers were extremely aggressive. At each polling station, they would apply sandalwood tilaks on Hindu voters' foreheads and appeal to them to vote in the name of Ram.

The support of the Janata Dal and of the bulk of the working people along with the minorities (both Sikhs and Muslims), however, ensured our victory.



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NN: During late 1980s, the questions linked to the upliftment of the OBCs and implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations started coming to the forefront. What was CPI(M)'s response?

SA: These issues were important campaign points for the Lohiaite groups, but were not very prominent during the elections in places like Kanpur. They became burning issues after VP Singh's government supported the recommendations and this was voted upon in Parliament. Both Communist Parties supported the government's stand. I would like to add that as soon as the government was formed, the issue of renewal of political reservations for SC/STs came up before Parliament. This was something that was done every ten years but this time both the Congress and the BJP instigated aggressive anti- reservation demonstrations and attacks.

I actually delivered my maiden speech in support of extending the term for political reservations for SC/STs. Here are some excerpts:

“Today when we are discussing the issue of extending the provision for reservation by another ten years and in order to take a decision in this matter it has to be considered whether the circumstances under which the said provision was made have changed and whether social exploitation and disparities have ended. In case it is otherwise, extending this provision becomes necessary.

...Atrocities are still being committed on them, in fact the incidents of atrocities and social exploitation are constantly increasing. Nothing can be more shameful than this for any country.

Dalits and Adivasis were deprived of every single sphere of any kind of privilege, be it ownership of land and any other means of production, political participation, economic status, educational status or influence in social strata. Incidents of mass rape, general massacre and their settlements being set on fire are the kind of atrocities which have become commonplace in the rural areas. The situation is not very different in urban space. In a municipal school in Mumbai, Dalit children were made to clean the toilet as that was their traditional occupation. In Delhi, two 12 year old caste Hindu children killed their Dalit classmate because he had sat side by side with them to study Sanskrit.

At this very moment, Shri Khilchand Jha is sitting on dharna here in Delhi. His crime is that he married a Dalit lady and he was not allowed to stay in his house and was dismissed from his job. The previous government promised him security and reinstatement, and he went back to Bihar where his house was set on fire and his wife was

attacked. He has come back to Delhi seeking justice. There are thousands of such stories.

Reservation alone will not end it but it is a crucial step. Land distribution, employment generation, strengthening of grass root democracy, provision of free and quality education should be our priorities...”

As far as OBC reservations are concerned, they have existed in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, Maharashtra etc. from before Independence and the (united) CPI and later the CPI(M) have not only supported them but agitated for them.

In Kerala reservations for Ezhavas, Muslims, Other Backward Hindus, Latin Catholics and Anglo-Indians, and backward Christians were in effect for years before independence. These were the result of different kinds of mobilisations against caste discrimination, oppression and exclusion that were prevalent. Communists like EMS, AK Gopalan, Krishna Pillai and many others were in the forefront of movements for social justice including the temple entry movements that occurred in the '20s and '30s. They were beaten and jailed during these movements and were, of course, the most uncompromising of the participants.

The Communist Party contested the second general election, in 1957, on an election manifesto which supported the extending of the reservation period and also extending reservations to other deprived sections.

Since 1957, when the first communist-led government assumed office in Kerala, the scope of reservations has been consistently and continuously expanded. There have been Congress-led Governments alternating with communist-led ones till the present time, but the strength of the Left has ensured that the battle for social justice could not be opposed in practice by any political formation.

Reservation for members of religious minorities has been restricted to those who belong to OBC communities identified in several State-lists and also in the Mandal Commission report. In Travancore and Cochin [both of which became part of Kerala in 1956], religion-based reservation was introduced in 1936. In 1952, this was replaced by communal reservation of 45%. Of this, 35% was earmarked for OBCs in-

cluding Muslims. After the re-organisation of States, the new State of Kerala came into existence, and the percentage of reservations was increased to 50% which included 40% for OBCs. The government introduced a sub-quota of 10% within the OBCs specifically for Muslims. Later on, this was replaced with 12% reservation for Muslims in State government jobs and 8% in professional educational institutions. Kerala is unique in that all Muslims, irrespective of their social and economic status, are categorized as OBCs. In 2021, the LDF government legislated reservations for the Christian Nadar community also.

Reservation based on religion as a category has become a very contentious issue. This became very apparent when the Sachar Committee recommendation for reservations to be extended to all Muslims was vociferously opposed and could not be implemented. Even the Ranganath Mishra Commission's recommendations to extend SC/ST reservations to Muslim and Christian Dalits and tribals have not been implemented. It is only the CPI(M) that has unreservedly supported these recommendations. The truth is, however, that most Dalit groups and political formations are only willing to support reservations for Muslim and Christian SCs and STs from a special quota beyond that being accessed by SCs and STs currently.

In the Northern states, the Left was not very active in campaigns demanding OBC reservation or implementation of the Mandal Commission recommendations.

It is important to add, that, while supporting OBC reservations, we have always been in the forefront of struggles against atrocities against the Dalits. Very often it is OBC groups and individuals who have been responsible for such atrocities. This is a very serious but less-discussed aspect of caste politics and caste mobilisations. It is often forgotten that hierarchy is intrinsic to the caste system, and at every level there are contradictions between groups and communities who want to maintain their hierarchical positions vis-à-vis those who are lower than themselves. The caste system, therefore, is able to gain support for its continuance at every level: among upper castes versus others; among OBCs versus Dalits; among men versus women in each caste grouping and so on.



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NN: The Mandal Commission report was brought before and debated in Parliament in 1990, one decade after it had been submitted. It generated a debate which you participated in on behalf of the CPI(M). Could you tell us about what transpired inside and outside the Parliament?

In Parliament, the atmosphere was very charged, and divisions on caste lines were extremely visible in the Congress and even more so in the BJP. The Congress formally supported the government's position, but its upper caste members were vocal in their opposition to the Mandal report and in their support for the anti-Mandal move-

ments that had started. This divide was clearly reflected in the speech of their Lok Sabha leader Rajiv Gandhi. On the one hand, he supported the Mandal Commission, and on the other he alleged the VP Singh government as repeating the British policy of divide and rule for bringing the Commission recommendation to the Parliament. The BJP was completely and openly divided. While its OBC leaders like Uma Bharti were vociferous and enthusiastic in their support for the government's decision, their upper caste leaders spoke against it in the House and were extremely upset. Of course, their ranks were very visible and active in the anti-Mandal agitations everywhere. It was in this situation that the BJP gave its call for the Rath Yatra. All those opposed to Mandal, including those who had hitherto supported other parties including ours, started shifting towards the BJP. OBCs and Dalits could also be mobilised for the Mandir movement by sentimental, religious appeals.

Outside Parliament, the situation was extremely volatile. Since I was from UP and spoke in Hindi, my interventions were given a lot of publicity in the Hindi press. Kanpur has a large Brahmin population, and upper castes were dominant in all organisations – trade unions, merchants, kisan. They were extremely aggressive and influential. SCs and OBCs, relatively unorganised and inarticulate, could not challenge the upper caste backlash. Some of our strongest supporters among LIC leaders and other employees' and working class leaders became our strongest critics. Our party comrades and myself had to face the vicious opposition of vocal sections of employees, workers and young people. Beneficiaries of reservation and the Mandal recommendations, unfortunately, remained quite passive. Most unfortunately, many of them were swayed by the Rath Yatra and Ram Janmabhoomi campaigns and joined the ranks of BJP supporters.

It is surprising and, in many cases, motivated that in much of the writings and discussions on the Mandal debate, the CPI(M) is accused of not having supported the implementation of the Mandal recommendations. This is absolutely untrue. I know this since I was an active participant in debates in Parliament and outside. We had to pay a heavy price for our support. Many upper caste leaders of unions and other organisations turned against us and attacked us mercilessly. We had to face physical attacks as well. These attacks took a communal turn as well and the campaign in the 1991 Lok Sabha election in Kan-

pur saw us being attacked from all quarters. Actually an atmosphere of hysteria prevailed. I have no doubt in my mind that those who are responsible for having started this campaign based on lies were focused on driving a wedge between the CPI(M) and the OBCs. Since many decades have passed, their writings have influenced several generations of people to become anti-communist on a completely false premise. This is extremely unfortunate.

The series of events set in motion in 1990 has changed the political scenario in UP and other Hindi-speaking States. While it has ensured the rise of OBC leaders and OBC political mobilisation, it has also been responsible for the phenomenal rise of the BJP which could use the Mandir mobilisation to consolidate the majority community across caste divisions. Class consciousness and mobilisation has receded considerably. This, in turn, facilitated the introduction of the neo-liberal reforms which strengthened these trends of caste and religious mobilisation and diminished class consciousness and mobilisation which continue, by and large, till today.

As far as the Party's ideological understanding of the issue of OBC reservation is concerned, Com. Prakash Karat's article 'Protect Unity with Social Justice' in People's Democracy in 1990 is the most comprehensive articulation of this. Some portions are quoted below:

“Reservation for the OBCs has existed in many States for a long time. It is a fact that the bulk of those who are categorised as OBCs in the States belong to the rural poor. They are sharecroppers, small tenants or poor peasants with small holdings. Further, in the rural areas the OBCs are in occupations which are still based on the traditional caste hierarchy such as dhobis, barbers, cattle-rearers and artisans. Their lowly caste status prevents their entry into education and new occupations... Therefore, where the caste status contributes to the backwardness of communities under the OBC category, and where anti-caste movements have not been able to cut across caste barriers and build powerful class-based mass organisations, there is a justification for providing reservations to such communities. This is the basis on which the CPI(M) supported the implementation of the Mandal Commission report since 1981-82 and earlier in States where due to prolonged movements the OBCs were accorded reservations.”

Prakash goes on to say in support of an economic criterion, "The complexity of the OBC problem lies, thus, in the fact that within some communities of the OBCs there is a great economic (inter-caste) differentiation and also there is inner-caste

differentiation, i.e., compared to a few better-off communities there are a number of more backward communities. This criterion need not necessarily be just an income ceiling, but can be a package in which income tax assessments, extent of landholding, professional status of parents, etc., can be taken into consideration."

His article also gives valuable historical information. "...As early as 1958, the Administrative Reforms Committee in Kerala headed by E.M.S. Namboodiripad, Chief Minister, suggested such a criterion for backward classes reservation. The Nettoor Damodaran Commission report of 1971 also made a similar suggestion. The Justice Chinnappa Reddy Commission report, the most recent in Karnataka, has recommended that from the OBC reservations those whose parents are income tax or sales tax assesses, hold land upto eight acres or are Class I officers can be excluded. In Kerala reservation in admissions to medical colleges is governed by an income criterion. Only those whose parents draw less than Rs, 20,000 per year are entitled to benefit from OBC reservation. In some other States like Tamil Nadu and Karnataka, there are two or three categories of backward classes, with the more backward either getting more fee concessions and other facilities or getting a greater quantum of reservations. The difficulty is that wherever OBC reservations already exist, the introduction of an economic criterion meets with strong resistance. Only when a broad consensus is reached can it be implemented. In Kerala, it has not been implemented so far as there is no such agreement. In the case of Bihar, when OBC reservations were being introduced for the first time in 1978, it was possible, after a destructive anti-reservation movement, to arrive at a formula which has been working since then. The 26 per cent reservation consists of 12 per cent of the most backward category listed in Annexure 1; eight per cent for other backward classes listed in Annexure II with an income ceiling of Rs 12,000 per annum; three per cent for women and three per cent for the poor of the forward castes. The National Front Government at the Centre should consider the Bihar Experience which brought about some stability in the tense caste situation."

He goes on to say that there must be periodic reviews undertaken of the experience of various OBC communities and then stresses an issue crucial for the promotion of class unity: "There is a second qualification with respect to OBC reservations. While the CPI(M) has been supporting the demand for the implementation of the Mandal Commission report, it has also been asking for a consensus to be evolved on the sensitive question."

His conclusions are extremely important:

"The Marxist analysis of contemporary reality holds that the anti-caste movement, if it is to be successful in eliminating caste domination, requires linking the anti-caste movements with the movement for agrarian revolution, for building the unity of the working people, and advancing the democratic movement.

...Unfortunately, some sections of the intelligentsia with democratic inclinations are opposing reservations for the OBCs on the plea that it perpetuates casteism and fragments society. This is to ignore the fact that it is the casteism of the upper-castes attendant with the monopoly of the means of production, which has perpetuated backwardness.

...The modern working class and the organised movement of the working people can advance only the basis of the unity of both sections of the working people -- the advanced sections of the urban working people and rural mass who suffer from both caste and economic oppression.

Those who advocate reservations without any restraint and recklessly compete to hike up quotas for the backward classes and scheduled castes are not mindful of the vital need for unity...Both the pro-reservationist and the anti-reservationist leaders work within the bourgeois mould and foster the illusion that the distribution of the limited number of jobs at stake is a life and death question for the advancement of their communities.

The CPI(M) attitude to OBC reservation stems from its class standpoint...The democratic sections amongst the toilers not covered by reservations, both working class and peasantry, have to

accept the necessity for reservations, so that overall unity can be cemented.

...The RSS has come out openly against the declared reservations for the OBCs. Denouncing V.P. Singh, the Organiser stated:He wants to undo the great task of uniting Hindu society from the days of Vivekananda, Dayanand Saraswati, Mahatma Gandhi and Dr Hedgewar." The RSS view, not surprisingly, is governed by its Hindu chauvinist upper-caste bias... Both the BJP and Congress(I) activists are actively competing to lead the anti-reservation agitation. Their representatives in the executive of the Delhi University Teachers Association have ganged up to try and pass a resolution condemning the implementation of the OBC reservations. From these activities it seems that for these parties, unlike the CPI(M), the demand for an economic criterion is not meant to improve the scheme of reservations, it is a ploy to try and scuttle its implementation.



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At the same time, the advanced democratic movement, the fighting organisations of the different sections of the people have a heavy responsibility before them:

1. To oppose movements against reservations.
2. To explain to the democratic sections not entitled to reservations, the necessity to accept this limited concession to those deprived of the capacity for equal competition due to historical-social conditions.
3. To counter caste-exclusive movements which stress only reservations and seek to keep the SC or reserved categories of employees and workers away from the common movement. This requires championing their special demands and problems.”

It was necessary to quote at length from this article to give a clear understanding of our Party’s understanding of this complex issue.

NN: It took almost one decade for the report to be placed before the Parliament after its submission to the government. Why was it delayed for such a long time?

SA: The Congress Party was never in favour of its implementation, and even in 1991, Rajiv Gandhi as leader of the opposition was very ambivalent on this issue.

NN: Could you remember specifically what all were mentioned in your speech during the debate? How did you counter the argument that reservations and even discussions about caste are ‘divisive’?

Some of the points in my speech in Parliament in support of the government’s decision were – opposition to the caste system; the lack of representation of OBCs in the administration, higher educational institutions etc.; strong criticism of those opposing the government in the name of ‘Hindu unity’ and the hypocrisy of those who were voicing support for the government’s decision but were also stoking resentment and opposition to it. These were members of the Congress and, even more so, members of the BJP.

All movements against caste discrimination are labelled 'divisive' and condemned as conspiracies to divide Hindu society by those who are committed to a system of caste hierarchy which they feel benefits them. This is not limited to only upper caste people but many sections of the OBCs too who want to safeguard their 'higher' status vis-à-vis the Dalits. The truth is that it is the caste system which is intrinsically divisive and cannot be the basis of any kind of unity, within castes and between castes. As Dr. Ambedkar had said, the caste system is based not only on the division of labour but on the division of labourers.

NN: What were the reactions in the country following the Mandal debate in the Parliament? How did different political parties respond to it?

SA: As a party, CPI(M) stuck to its support for Mandal but we learnt a lot about caste polarisation among our own supporters and mass organisation members from their reactions. JD was strong in its defence of Mandal but the strength of the Mandal consolidation was broken when Mulayam Singh Yadav supported Chandra Shekhar who ousted V.P. Singh and became PM himself. Interestingly, many of Chandra Shekhar's supporters were upper caste critics of the Mandal Commission, and Chandra Shekhar was himself ambivalent. While Mulayam Singh benefitted from the impetus that OBC political mobilisation received (as did Lalu Prasad Yadav), the bitter division in the ranks supporting implementation of the Mandal Commission Report was to have very far-reaching consequences.

NN: Could you tell us something about the communists' history of fighting caste oppression and understanding the caste-class character of Indian society?

SA: This question is best answered by referring to the writings of Comrades BT Ranadive and EMS Namboodiripad, and to Party documents.

Com. BTR wrote a long piece for the Economic and Political Weekly in 1971, on 'Caste, Class and Property Relations'. Some important sections from that are quoted below. He has referred to the 1930 Platform of Action of the CPI which is the first clarion call by any political party in our country for the abolition of the caste system:

“Social reformers have not understood this link between the agrarian revolution in India and the retention of caste and communal inequalities, outlook and prejudices. For them casteism and communalism were just injustices unlinked with any production relation system, a prejudice to be removed by denouncing it, by asking those who practice it to reject it, and nothing more. The struggle was not to be linked with the present-day social system – its pre-capitalist and capitalist basis, its source of class exploitation. It was not to be conducted as part of the general democratic movement or modern class struggle... The Communist Party was the only party which linked the struggle against untouchability and caste-system with agrarian revolution and end to imperialist domination. It alone saw in agrarian revolution and class struggle the key to overcome Hindu-Muslim separateness in practice. The Platform of Action of the CPI, 1930, said:

“As a result of the rule of British imperialism in our country, there are still in existence millions of slaves, and tens of millions of socially outcaste working pariahs, who are deprived of all rights. British rule, the system of landlordism, the reactionary caste system, religious deception and all the slave and serf traditions of the past throttle the Indian people and stand in the way of its emancipation. They have led to the result that in India, in the twentieth century, there are still pariahs who have no right to meet with their fellowmen, drink from common wells, study in common schools, etc.

Instead of putting an end once for all to this shameful blot on the Indian people, Gandhi and other Congress leaders call for the maintenance of the caste system which is the basis of and justification for the existence of that socially outcaste pariahs. Only the ruthless abolition of the caste system in its reformed, Gandhist variety, only the agrarian revolution and violent overthrow of British rule, will lead to the social, economic, cultural and legal emancipation of the working pariahs and slaves. The CP of India calls upon all the pariahs to join in the united revolutionary front — with all the workers of the country against British rule and landlordism.

The CP of India calls on all the pariahs not to give in to the tricks of British and reactionary agents who try to split and set one against the other the toilers of our country.

The CP of India fights for the complete abolition of slavery, the caste system and the caste inequality in all its forms (social, cultural etc). The CP of India fights for the complete and absolute equality of the working pariahs and all the toilers of our country.”

It will be seen that the Communists did not say that caste, untouchability and communal outlook would disappear without a revolutionary struggle against the antiquated land system and British rule; or that the struggle to eradicate the caste system can be fought in isolation from the class struggle in the villages and the cities, by mere denunciation of the system. They knew that this class struggle was of a people who were not yet free from caste prejudices and who therefore had to be united in the course of the struggle to discover their common identity as exploited. Real and abiding unity was to be achieved during the course of the revolutionary struggle which is fought with no holds barred.

...The Communists also saw that caste disintegration was taking place rapidly; in each caste differentiation was taking place between the haves and have-nots and that the process of pauperisation was affecting all castes. Almost all peasant castes have been the victims of this process. Thus a new common bond was being created between the lower sections of all castes – a bond which had to be stressed and consolidated during the course of the common struggle. It was therefore necessary to stress this common bond while fighting against caste inequalities. Here there is no question of replacing caste by class, refusing to recognize the caste distinctions and recognising only the class distinctions. It is a question of addressing yourself to the concrete reality which combined the growing formation of an exploited class with the existence of caste distinctions – the formation process of the class. Those who did not understand this double process landed themselves into reformism”.

Com. EMS Namboodiripad’s understanding of the caste system was that it combined social oppression and class exploitation. He wrote:

“...it would... be unrealistic to pose the problem as if it is either class struggle or caste conflict. The fact is that there is a certain interpenetration of class and caste... In the actual social conditions of Kerala, the development of the democratic movement is bound to be linked with the organised struggle against caste-Hindu domination.” (“Once Again on Castes and Classes”, Social Scientist, 1981, 9 (12)).

In 1979, EMS wrote about the basic weakness of the Congress Party and its futile efforts to find scapegoats for the failures of the civil disobedience movement etc.:

“All this [the failures] was conveniently blamed on the ‘wily manoeuvres’ of the British rulers and the ‘lack of patriotism’ on the part of the caste and communal leaders. Mahatma Gandhi made the heroic statement that, if only the British rulers left India to her fate, all the caste and communal problems would be solved immediately and automatically. The total unreality of this assertion was proved not only by the large-scale massacres that accompanied the partition of India – massacres which are perhaps the most inhuman in the history of mankind – but by the fact that, after full 31 years of independence, India today is as politically divided as it was in the pre-independence days on caste and communal lines. Those nationalists who even today blame caste and communal organisations for all the evils that are overtaking our country should ponder over the question of why they (the caste and communal leaders) are able to release the worst kind of sentiments among the people for inciting the most inhuman atrocities on the scheduled castes, scheduled tribes and backward communities.”

“The national movement, as was sought to be built up by its bourgeois leaders, was primarily a movement for the ‘revival’ of the ‘age-old’ Indian civilisation and culture. This civilisation and culture, let us remind ourselves again, is based on the village community at whose centre is the division of society into a hierarchy of castes. Millions of people, who had, out of sheer helplessness, borne the burden of this caste-based society, were for the first time able to see that they need no more be bound by the ideology of Varnashrama Dharma. They started imbibing a part of the modern bourgeois ideology – freedom, equality and fraternity. They were not prepared to tolerate a movement which would culminate in the replacement of the then ruling British imperialism by the old Varnashrama society.”

“...one has to abandon all ideas of paying tributes to the ‘age-old’ civilisation and culture of India. One has to realise that the rebuilding of India on modern democratic and secular lines requires an uncompromising struggle against the caste-based Hindu society and its culture. There is no question of secular democracy, not to speak of socialism, unless the very citadel of India’s ‘age-old’ civilisation and culture – the division of society into a hierarchy of castes – is broken. In other words, the struggle for radical democracy and socialism cannot be separated from the struggle against caste society.” (“Caste Conflicts v/s Growing Unity of Popular Democratic Forces”, Economic and Political Weekly, 1979, 14 (7-8), pp. 333-334).

The CPI(M) from its inception, in all its documents has repeatedly addressed the issue of caste and called upon its members and supporters to confront this issue with understanding and courage.

The CPI(M) programme, updated in 2000, deals with this issue in detail. It says:

“The bourgeois-landlord system has also failed to put an end to caste oppression. The worst sufferers are the scheduled castes. The dalits are subject to untouchability and other forms of discrimination despite these being declared unlawful. The growing consciousness among the dalits for emancipation is sought to be met with brutal oppression and atrocities. The assertion by the dalits has a democratic content reflecting the aspirations of the most oppressed sections of society. The backward castes have also asserted their rights in a caste-ridden society.

At the same time, a purely caste appeal which seeks to perpetuate caste divisions for the narrow aim of consolidating vote banks and detaching these downtrodden sections from the common democratic movement has also been at work. Many caste leaders and certain leaders of bourgeois political parties seek to utilise the polarisation on caste lines for narrow electoral gains and are hostile to building up the common movement of the oppressed sections of all castes. They ignore the basic class issues of land, wages and fight against landlordism, which is the basis for overthrowing the old social order.”

NN: Could you say something on the formation of the Dalit Shoshan Mukti Manch (DSMM), its objectives, activities and campaigns?

SA: At the time of DSMM's formation, strong anti-caste and anti-untouchability organisations and movements in which CPI(M) played an important and leading role already existed in Tamil Nadu, Kerala, united Andhra Pradesh and Tripura. The Hindi heartland was lagging behind, and therefore the DSMM was founded as an organisation fighting for Dalit rights and against Dalit oppression and atrocities against Dalits by joining hands with all Dalit organisations and democratic organisations. We have had limited success but it has been a positive development. It has to be taken forward in a big way. The Manuvadi policies of the BJP governments and their attack on and curtailment of Dalit rights have to be fought at every level, building the widest possible unity. DSMM has been active in standing in soli-

parity with those who were killed and arrested after the April Bandh in 2018. In BJP-ruled states UP, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan (ruled by BJP at that time) it was only DSMM and the CPI(M) that were seen standing with the Dalits who faced terrible violence and victimisation.

DSMM has also been supporting all the struggles of the working class and the peasantry after its formation. During the current farmers' struggle, DSMM is making an effort in all the Hindi states to mobilise Dalit communities in support of the struggle.