

THE WEDNESDAY INTERVIEW | SITARAM YECHURY

‘Sabarimala will have a positive impact on the Lok Sabha elections’

The CPI(M) general secretary on Opposition unity, the reservation debate, and why the Left is more relevant today than ever before

SOBHANA K. NAIR

Despite protests in Kerala against the entry of women aged 10-50 into Sabarimala, CPI(M) general secretary Sitaram Yechury believes that the controversy will have a positive impact on the party's performance in the Lok Sabha elections. In this interview, Mr. Yechury says Opposition unity will "vary from State to State", explains why the CPI(M) supports 10% reservation for the poorer sections in the general category and why the Left is still relevant. Excerpts:

Last year, the CPI(M) had said that its priority is to oust the BJP-led government at the Centre. With less than 100 days left for this government to complete its term, how confident are you of meeting this target?

Very confident. In fact, it reminds me of the 100 days before the 2004 Lok Sabha elections given that the same narrative was built then too: that there is no alternative to Atal Bihari Vajpayee, that India is shining, that there is a feel-good factor... The BJP had won a round of Assembly elections then and had advanced the [Lok Sabha] elections with the confidence that they were going to come back to power. But we know what happened. The same thing is in the process today. Why I am confident is that, in our country, given its diversity, different political parties have different spheres of influence in different States... The coalition that forms the alternate government has always emerged only after the elections. That was the case with the United Front government in 1996, the Vajpayee government in 1998, and the Manmohan Singh government in 2004.

The Left parties skipped the recent Opposition rally organised by Trinamool Congress (TMC) chief Mamata Banerjee. In this context, do you think conflicting ideologies and personal ambitions will come in the way of an anti-BJP alliance?

Conflicting ideologies will come in the way. The Left parties did not skip the rally, we were not invited. And if we were invited, we would have taken a decision on what to do. You cannot be murdering democracy in Bengal and championing the protection of democracy elsewhere in India. Between the BJP and the TMC in Bengal, there is competitive communalism. This [poses] immense danger [to the] unity and integrity of India – more so because it is a border State with tensions with Bangladesh and Myanmar. The only way forward is to defeat the TMC and save Bengal and defeat the BJP and save India.

But what about Opposition unity?

It will vary from State to State. The decision we have taken – and I think that is the line pursued by all the secular parties – is to maximise the pooling of anti-BJP votes.

Many in the CPI(M) are worried about the impact that the Sabarimala controversy will have on the party's chances in the elections. Your views?

Fifty-five lakh women coming together from across the State for a human wall was historic and unprecedented. The fact that so many joined indicates where the opinion of the people of Kerala lies. We think it will have a positive impact on the Lok Sabha elections and the forthcoming Assembly elections.



FILE PHOTO: V.V. KRISHNAN

The Congress has been supporting the call to ban women's entry into Sabarimala. In the fight for votes between you and the BJP, will the Congress emerge as the winner?

It is most unfortunate, we condemn that. As far as the BJP and this government is concerned, when it comes to the triple talaq Bill, they talk about women's equality. But when it comes to Sabarimala, they side with traditions. That is the same argument of the Muslim clergy against the triple talaq Bill. It is a wrong decision taken by the Congress. They can't have one position at the Centre and another in the State. Both the chairperson of the UPA and the Congress president have said that they stand for equality and secularism. This is a blatant contradiction. I think people are seeing through their doublespeak. They will draw no electoral benefit from this kind of stand. On the contrary, they will lose the secular vote.

The CPI(M) surprisingly supported 10% reservation for the economically

Our goal is to defeat the TMC and save Bengal and defeat the BJP and save India

backward among the general category.

At the time of the Mandal agitation, this issue had surfaced. At that time, we were the only party talking about economic criteria, as far as the OBCs were concerned. The constitutional position regarding the SCs/STs is undisputed, and there is no compromise possible on that. On the OBCs, we had said that we will require economic criteria to determine that the benefits of reservation go to the people who actually deserve it. We were the only party that took this position. Even the other Left parties were not in favour of this. The Supreme Court, our only ally, came up with the formulation of a creamy layer. At that point of time, the question that had come up was, what about the economically poor in non-reserved categories? We said that should also be considered. We were critical of the manner in which they

brought in the [quota] Bill. Who are the people who will benefit? There is no discussion or consultation on how you will define the economically weaker section. It is clear that this is only meant for elections. But as a concept, we said this merits serious consideration.

What are the amendments that you propose to make this law more effective?

One, immediately there should be some sort of a mechanism to identify who are the people who qualify. This can't be confined to any one section. It has to be extended to the poor everywhere. How do you define the poor? The numbers have to be enumerated. All this is, to use the BJP's terminology, a 'jumla'. Unless there is job creation, this is a meaningless exercise. The amendment we want is that you should extend this, along with all other reservations for SC/STs/OBCs, to the private sector. The government is recklessly privatising everything and is outsourcing all its work. Government jobs are declining rapidly. What is the meaning of this reservation if there are

no jobs?

So do you think caste-based reservation should be completely done away with and replaced by economic criteria alone?

No. Caste-based reservation is a constitutional provision. Reservation is meant for social inclusion and is not a poverty alleviation measure. Even when these measures [reservation for SCs/STs] are in existence, we have not been able to achieve our objective. We are not against that. What we are saying is that the economically weaker section category can only be an add-on, if at all.

Can you give me a ballpark figure on how many seats the CPI(M) will win in 2019?

We are fighting every seat to win. All the seats where we are going to be in a contest are seats where we are seriously in contention.

So how many seats are you contesting, considering you are looking at alliances in many States?

It depends on how these understandings evolve. The discussions are on, in Bihar, Maharashtra, and various other States. Normally, we contest around 60. So it will be close to that.

What about your situation in West Bengal and Tripura?

Let's see. Things are changing and rather fast in Tripura. The Indigenous People's Front of Tripura (IPFT) is moving away from the BJP. Many tribals are now seeing through the game plan of this opportunistic getting together of the BJP and the IPFT. What the BJP promised the tribals was a separate State. Now they have rescinded

their promise... Things are in a state of flux. There is a good chance of improvement from the Assembly results.

In Bengal, the overall mood indicates that we are in a position to advance towards our goal of saving Bengal by defeating the TMC and saving India by defeating the BJP. But the main point in Bengal is to allow our support to translate into votes. That has to be ensured. What has been happening is, we have been losing elections because our support base has not been physically allowed, due to attacks, to go and cast their vote. If there is a peaceful, free and fair election in Bengal, we have a good chance of improving.

In the Lok Sabha elections, is the CPI(M) hopeful of breaking new ground?

Of course. Today, there is no doubt – and even the worst of our enemies will admit to this – that on the ground, it is the Left that is mobilising the people in protest. Now, this has to be translated into votes. That is where we will be breaking new ground, particularly in those areas where these big struggles have taken place, like Maharashtra and Rajasthan, which are not traditionally our strongholds. I think you will find a few surprise victories by us in places other than Bengal, Kerala and Tripura.

What role does the Left see for itself if there is a UPA-like situation?

It depends on what kind of a combination ultimately emerges. The Left will definitely play a role to stabilise and catalyse an alternative secular government in the country.

If you are part of the government directly or

indirectly, will you work towards withdrawing the sedition law and Aadhaar?

Whenever the Left had an important role to play in government, we ensured that many right things happened. Look at the Right to Information, Right to Education, Right to Food Security, MNREGA and so on. If we have that sort of a role, then we will definitely use the influence [to ensure] that many wrong things do not happen. We want sedition out. And Aadhaar, the question of privacy, when intrusion into privacy... that is something we will ensure legally that it can't be done.

There is a feeling that the communist ideology is no longer relevant.

Which is the second economic powerhouse in the world? China. The ruling party there swears by Marxism and Leninism. And the fact that China has achieved this success is not because communism is irrelevant, but because it is relevant. Secondly, in non-socialist countries, all across the Latin America, it is the Left and Left-inspired movements that are taking on the U.S.'s might. In France, President Emmanuel Macron had to finally back down and accept the demands of the working classes. On the one hand, there is the rise of the right, which is taking a neo-fascistic form. Xenophobia and racism are growing. And on the other hand, there is the Left and popular struggles. This is the political fight. The turn to the political right is in order to control these protest actions and ensure that they do not turn into a political alternative to capitalism. So, it is not that it is becoming irrelevant; it is becoming more relevant. And this battle is going on in our country too.

SINGLE FILE

Fiction in the time of Islamophobia

Ausma Zehanat Khan's Khattak-Getty series is an antidote to the stereotypical portrayal of Muslims of the West

MOHAMMED AYOOB



At a time when Islamophobia is at its peak in the West, Pakistani-Canadian novelist Ausma Zehanat Khan has performed great service in countering the stereotype of the Western Muslim as an outsider. A writer of crime fiction, she has done this through her Khattak-Getty series of four novels that are set partly in Canada and partly in different Muslim majority countries, such as Bosnia, Iran and Syria.

The central protagonist of the series is detective Inspector Essa Khattak, a Canadian whose parents migrated to Toronto from Peshawar. Khan does not try to hide Khattak's internal struggle between his Muslim identity and his loyalty to the Canadian state. Simultaneously, he is depicted as a police officer with a conscience who goes beyond the call of duty when brought face to face with human suffering. His assistant Rachel Getty is similarly portrayed as an efficient policewoman, but one who must contend with personal demons. Getty often appears more hard-headed than her more idealistic superior and her intuition sometimes surpasses Khattak's instincts for detection.

While critical of negative Western attitudes towards Muslims even when the latter are superb performers in their fields, Khan makes no attempt to gloss over the inherent faults and weaknesses of Muslim societies that she exposes. She especially targets the tyrannical nature of Muslim regimes in West Asia. Her novel *A Dangerous Crossing* is a severe indictment of the tyrannical Syrian regime as well as of agents of human trafficking masquerading as saviours. *Among the Ruins* is a stringent denunciation of the mullah-dominated regime in Iran that exposes the workings of its torture chambers and the intrinsic corruption of a dictatorship masquerading in the guise of "righteous" Islamic rule.

Whilst emphasising the positive contributions of Muslim citizens of the West, Khan is not oblivious to the actions of a very small minority of extremists among them that provides justification for Islamophobia in the West. In *The Language of Secrets*, she tackles this issue and the distorted ideology that provides terrorist cells justification for their violent acts against fellow citizens. She paints a realistic image of the charismatic personality of the leader of one of these cells and the rhetoric and tactics he uses to attract a small number of gullible youth to his cause. Khattak and Getty eventually foil the terrorist plot despite the obstacles placed in their way by superior officers.

Khan's Khattak-Getty series is a potent antidote to the simplistic and stereotypical portrayal of Muslim citizens of the West that one finds in a section of the Western media and among right-wing public personalities.

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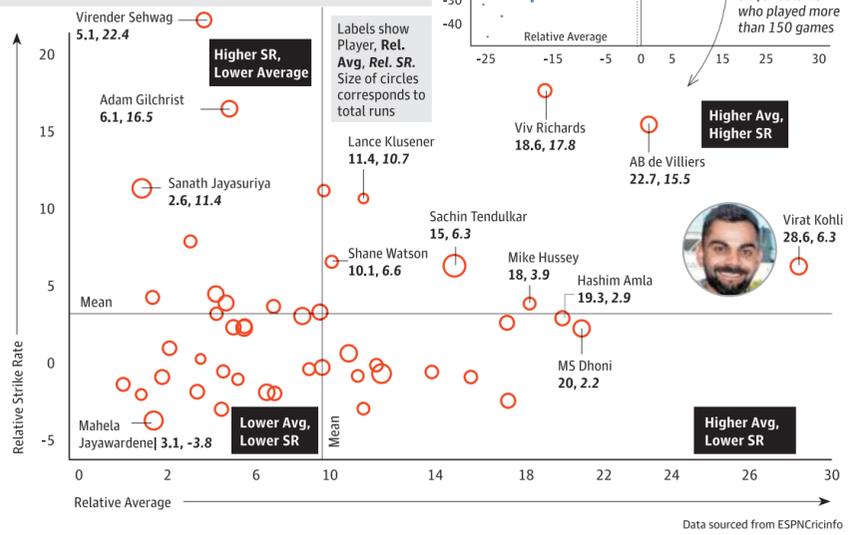


DATA POINT

The Dons of ODIs

Advanced numbers show that Virat Kohli is among the best batsmen in One Day International cricket, up there with AB de Villiers and Viv Richards. By Srinivasan Ramani

To determine who the best batsmen are, we measure how a batsman has done in his time and the extent to which he has outperformed his peers. We can then compare this margin with the margins of other batsmen in their eras. For this, we find the Relative Average – the difference between a player's batting average and those of all other batsmen during the period the player was active. Similarly, we calculate the Relative Strike Rate (SR). We then plot these two variables on a scatter graph (see right) and find the players who had the best scores on both parameters. Graph below plots values only for the 'elite'



FROM The Hindu ARCHIVES

FIFTY YEARS AGO JANUARY 23, 1969

Macbeth's witches not guilty

Three judges yesterday [January 21] cleared a man of a witchcraft conviction and said that on the evidence they would have done the same for the three witches in Macbeth. The man, Seychelles islander Jean Eugenie, had been sentenced to 18 months in prison there for possessing articles of witchcraft: Three packs of cards, including one with 12 aces, a sheet of paper with the names of three local judges on it, a box of black powder, firecracker fuses and a match box with two coins and dried leaves. But the three judges, sitting here [London] at the British Indian Ocean colony's Court of Appeals, said better expert evidence would have been needed "even if the articles found had included the head of a cockerel, the feet of a bat, or the things that went into the Macbeth pot". Eugenie claimed the cards belonged to his children and that he used the dried leaves and black powder as a herbalist, specialising in asthma and indigestion cases.

A HUNDRED YEARS AGO JANUARY 23, 1919

Cholera in Bombay.

There were over 500 deaths in Bombay city in 24 hours ending this morning and 311 of them are certified to be cholera. The Health Officer in an explanatory statement this evening says: The sudden and rapid rise in the mortality of the city is due to cholera chiefly amongst the mill hands and in mill districts. On the 10th January cholera deaths were 36 and declining. On the 9th January, mill hands struck work and the mills were closed a few days later. The cholera mortality rose to 48 on the 17th and 311 to-day [January 22]. Instead of being able to use the latrine of the mills 1,50,000 persons resorted to congested chawls in the streets, eating and drinking whatever they could get parading the streets and joining funeral parties.

CONCEPTUAL Labelling theory

SOCIOLOGY
This refers to a theory of social behaviour which states that the behaviour of human beings is influenced significantly by the way other members in society label them. It has been used to explain a variety of social behaviour among groups, including deviant criminal behaviour. According to this theory, individuals who are labelled as criminals by society, for instance, may be more likely to engage in criminal activities simply due to such social labelling. By the same logic, positive labelling by society can influence individuals to exhibit positive behaviour. The labelling theory was developed and popularised by American sociologist Howard S. Becker in his 1963 book *Outsiders*.

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Who is Stefanos Tsitsipas?

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