

## Third Front or Third Rail?

With elections looming on the political horizon, CPI-M's doughty general secretary Prakash Karat, has begun floating the idea of a Third Front which would band together all secularist parties. It would keep BJP and Congress out and away since these have been communally driven, and would counter their hard (overt) and soft (covert and coy) variants of communal virus. The voters would be offered a choice between the peddlers of theo-fascist terrorism which has cost the nation thousands of innocent lives and the protagonists of secularism which is antithetical to every kind of discrimination.

Any formation that promises some respite from the death squad savagery of BJP and the fecklessness of Congress that throws to winds the victims of BJP's relentless series of communal carnages would be more than welcome. But are good intentions enough? Is it not true that sometimes they pave the way to hell?

In terms of the electoral game, proudly touted as democracy, is it realistic to hope for many partisans of sincere and substantive secularism? Is it merely temporizing an electoral slogan, a tentative tactic, or an ideological credo affirming respect for and commitment to republican India and its Constitution? Does CPM believe in the separation of religion and state? Do its prospective associates? Secularism is not visiting mandirs, mosques, churches and gurdwaras by politicos and state functionaries who preside over religiously marked events and noisily queue up for *iftar* parties. This is, in fact, invasive intrusion of religion in the affairs of the state, and it breeds plethora of troubles as manifest so far. It is not even equal respect for all religions, platitudinous assertion to the contrary notwithstanding. In fact it is vulgar de rigueur, instrumentalizing religion in the bid for personal power, just like US presidential hopefuls holding a baby for the journalists' cameras every poll season of carnival and charade.

Secularism posits egalitarianism, respect for diversity, embrace of pluralism and rule of law, equality between citizens, and justice for all. These absent, secularism is reduced to an empty shell.

Does Karat, believe there are political parties around which are devoutly so committed? Does he believe secularism will or can be promoted through the parliament? Were it so, why are child marriage and bride burning still so rampant? Is parliamentarism be all and end all of progressive and socially transformative politics? How does he square this solicitude for parliamentary path with the fact that not just abominable characters continue to become lawmakers but also yesteryear's rajas and ranis have morphed overnight into custom- designed democrats?

It is identity-mired, caste-encrusted, region-pulled, and individual-centred chiaroscuro that is politics now all across India. Can he eschew or escape it? Can he dent it, moderate it? Very unlikely. Not to put too fine a point on it, here are a few examples. Mayawati joined forces with BJP several times, to the extent that she stumped in Gujarat for Modi, the 'merchant of death'! She also became cozy with Congress, impelled not by noble motives like secularism but by her calculus of power grab. The cases of Jayalalita, Deve Gowda, and Chandrababu Naidu are some of the stark disappointments. Mulayam Singh-Amar Singh? Time servers

and opportunists, now form the staple of poll politics, which is, in plain words, power grab, all salivating for a piece of the pie.

The Congress whine that the Third Front would divide and weaken secularists is no more than that, a whine, only to enable its sustenance in power. Its secular credentials lie tattered all over the length and breadth of India.

If he has not set himself the task of a modern Vishwakarma for fabricating secularists on demand, and clone them in sufficient numbers to form a sizeable party, Karat's noble and grandiose idea is just, alas, an idea, whose time in the inimitable Indian political calendar has not yet come. □□□

*[Contributed]*