INTERVIEW | No compromise ever with PFI, Jamaat-e-Islami: KM Shaji

By Express News Service

KM Shaji is one with a huge fan following in Indian Union Muslim League (IUML). Considered conventional and progressive at the same time, Shaji reflects the identity crisis his party is going through these days. Shaji talks to TNIE about being a Muslim politician in today's India, about SDPI and Jamaat-e-Islami, his controversial stand on 'gender neutrality' and the challenges faced by the IUML. Excerpts:

You were one of the few IUML leaders who openly took a stand against the Popular Front of India (PFI) even when the PFI was in the formative stage under the banner of the National Democratic Front (NDF)...
I oppose PFI and Jamaat-e-Islami because they brainwash Muslim youth in Kerala. They have managed to penetrate the minds of the youth by forming a lot of cultural organisations. The biggest challenge was to convince our community members that their agenda and motives were bad. They never openly confronted us and it created confusion in the community. But, we continued to fight against their agenda within the Muslim community. SDPI's only path is violence and they don't have any strong ideological or religious mooring. What SDPI and PFI are

propagating in the name of true Islam is wrong. Their view on Quran is not correct. Even their religious vision is not correct.

Of late, it seems you have gone soft on PFI and Jamaat-e-Islami…
It's only a misconception that I have given up the fight against PFI. There will be no compromise with PFI or Jammat-e-Islami.

There was a time when NDF members also became members of the IUML. Do you think a few IUML leaders at one point approved this dual membership eyeing votes and support of NDF?
It's not only the youth of IUML who fell for NDF. Even youths of the AP Sunni faction, Samastha, and Mujahid joined NDF at that time. We found that we couldn't fight them using our secular credentials as they were using Quran and Hadees to propagate their political agenda. So we reached out to religious bodies in our community to fight them and managed to isolate them.

But PFI is still growing in Kerala and other states…
Minorities across the world always feel insecure. Terrorist groups thrive on this fear of insecurity. IUML continuing to be a part of a political front despite never getting its due is just to provide security to the community. But, for outfits like PFI, it's quite easy to bring together the Muslim community by just showing Sangh Parivar organisations on the other side as opponents. Ours is not an easy task.

What do you have to say about the possibility of a ban on PFI?
I don't personally approve of banning any organisation as it is not the way to counter the growth of an organisation. We should make an organisation irrelevant through ideological debates. If we ban an organisation, it takes returns in another form. Just look at SIMI and NDF. Both of them were banned but they assumed new names and became PFI and SDPI.

For the general public, PFI/SDPI and Jamaat-e-Islami are two sides of the same coin. Do you differentiate between them?
Jamaat-e-Islami is an ideology while SDPI is the practical version of Jamaat-e-Islami. SDPI is the practical implementation of the teachings of Syed Abul A'la Maududi, who is the founder of Jamaat-e-Islami. Jamaat-e-Islami does not indulge

in violence directly. But they both believe in the same ideology. While Jamaat-e-Islami is ready to wait for a time when their ideology becomes a universal way of life, SDPI is not ready to wait and is trying to practically implement it.

But IUML had joined hands with Jamaat-e-Islami in the last elections…
IUML can never have an alliance with Jamaat-e-Islami. Until they broke up with CPM, Jamaat-e-Islami has been supporting CPM in the elections. Last elections, UDF got votes from Jamaat-e-Islami but it was never a political alliance. IUML will never think of having an alliance with Jamaat-e-Islami.

Do you think League is facing an existential crisis or ideological crisis in the wake of the growth of PFI and other Muslim outfits?
Outfits like SDPI are trying to stay relevant hiding their real identities. Even Jamaat-e-Islami named its political party as Welfare Party. We have been in Indian politics calling ourselves as Muslim League. We are not hypocrites and we don't want to hide our identity. We are what we are.

Do you think more youngsters are getting attracted to PFI?
In Kerala, it's not happening that much whereas it's taking place in other states.

Isn't it true that PFI is purposefully avoiding the Malabar region and focusing on growing in South Kerala…
Yes. PFI has been able to make some inroads in a few southern regions in the state where the League doesn't have a strong presence. PFI has been presenting itself as a saviour of the community.

How will you counter PFI's growth in southern districts?
We can counter them only by a collective effort of the people. We can counter fundamentalists like SDPI or PFI only if Muslims become more secular. Hindus too have a role in preventing Muslims from taking the path of fundamentalism. Similarly, to prevent Hindus from supporting fascist parties, Muslims should be more secular.

There is a general feeling that BJP is not able to capture Kerala because of the presence of the Left. Do you agree?
Communist Party was the reason earlier. But CPM has changed a lot recently as

part of a compromise political strategy. They are ready for any compromise just to stay in power. Of late, the red flag is gradually having a shade of saffron in it. Grassroots-level functionaries of CPM are still true to their ideology but leaders are making compromises to stay in power.

There is a perception that Congress which is toeing the soft Hindutva line nationally will not be able to protect the minority communities. In the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) issue and the Bilkis Bano case, we didn't see Congress taking a strong stand. Also, we have seen Rahul Gandhi keen on projecting him as a Brahmin who wears sacred thread…
I don't understand why Congress is always being tied up to soft Hindutva positions. What's wrong with Rahul being a Hindu? Indian secularism is about showing courage to openly declare one's religious mooring. Only a hypocrite hides his religion.

So you view secularism as asserting one's religion in public?
Yes. Secularism in India is like that. None should feel bad about openly stating their religion. Even great Mahatma Gandhi never hesitated in openly admitting that he was a Hindu. In a country like India, none should fear openly revealing their religious identity. Our constitution guarantees that freedom.

Is that why you said leaving the Muslim League would be tantamount to leaving Islam itself?
That's nonsense! If someone did say something like that I would term it as foolishness. Such a misunderstanding happened due to a misanalysis of my speech. How can someone say that? Muslim League is not a religious organisation. It is a political organisation.

K M Shaji and M K Muneer were once presumed to be the progressive faces in IUML. However, that perception has changed due to the stand taken by you two recently…
I don't mind being called a retrograde person. I can't compromise my deeply-rooted beliefs. And even if I do, when I go back home I will revert to my beliefs and continue to practice that.

Do you have problems with a man and a woman sharing a common space on

equal terms?
No, I have no problem with that. The need of the hour is gender justice and not equality. Women need to get what they deserve. Priority should be given to capability. But that is not what the Communist party is doing. The very example of this fact is K K Shailaja. It was okay to have her sit beside the CM during press conferences. But if she becomes bigger than Pinarayi Vijayan, that's not okay. Women are not allowed to go above men in CPM.

IUML is criticising CPM for being anti-women! Isn't that a joke?
IUML has limitations. We have created a separate organisation for women.

But why a separate organisation?
Our community is different from others and has a lot of limitations. But that doesn't mean the girls are being held back. You can count many girls, especially from our women's wing Haritha, going places.

But the IUML had taken action against them instead of punishing the people whom they had pointed out as culprits. Why?
That is because of a lack of clarity in the altercation within the organisation. After the issue was brought before the council and it was proven that such an incident hadn't happened, the party stood with those who were accused. But, I was not a party to that issue. If such a patriarchal stand was taken then Haritha should have been disbanded. But that was not what happened.

But why are these efficient girls from Haritha not getting a chance to share the stage with the big-wigs of IUML or take part in making crucial decisions for the party?
Such a thing will happen in due course. We are trying to bring a change in a community that believes that it is unholy to even allow the chalk dust from the Quran teachings written on the board to fall on the ground. We are urging parents to not only educate the girls but also let them gain employment instead of being married off. However, if you compare us with other communities it can be said that we are yet to come on par.

What is your problem with the concept of gender equality?
We have a lot of problems with that concept. Liberalism is a philosophy that paves

the way for an undisciplined lifestyle. Would academic excellence be achieved only when boys and girls sit together?

What is IUML's problem if a boy and a girl sit together?
Why should they insist that a boy and girl should sit together?

But the government did not insist. It only suggested that schools can arrive at a dress code comfortable for the students. The rest was League's creation…
No. League never created any such thing. All this is being created by the so-called Left intellectuals. The equality that the CPM talks about is pure eyewash. They have not implemented it in their organisation. Let me tell you. My daughter's uniform at her school was pants and a shirt till Class XII. Even now her uniform is pants and a shirt. Even my wife wears jeans.

IUML does not accept gays or lesbians?
No. We don't, though it is a reality. Not all realities can be accepted.

But Rahul Gandhi had met people from the transgender community the other day...
We can't express our bodily needs as such in society. But I will recognise transgenders. Also, Rahul Gandhi is not my leader.

IUML may have tried to score political points by opposing the concept of gender neutrality. But do you recognise that the community was isolated on the issue?
We are convinced that it is a Leftist agenda. If it is proved wrong we are ready to correct our stand.

What is happening within the IUML these days? There seems to be a lot of churning…
Lots of debates happen inside the party. It was reported that I was criticised by the members in the last meeting. So, we can say that something is happening within the party other than eating biriyani… (laughs)

Will you agree if we say that K M Shaji is the most controversial leader in IUML?

I like to be called a rebel. I consider it a good thing to be a rebel. But that would be inside the party. I won't become a rebel outside the party. I don't like to simply listen and nod my head. I have a definite opinion and I have no scruples in expressing it inside the party.

How is your relationship with P K Kunhalikutty?

I have been associated with him since my childhood days. My disputes have always been issue-based. Sometimes he may reject my opinion or I will oppose his suggestion. We debate and accept the decision of the majority.

Are there two groups in IUML – one led by Kunhalikutty and another by Muneer and you?

People say I am against Kunhalikutty. The differences of opinion are issue-based and not personal. We discuss issues openly within the party and Kunhalikutty sahib has openly said that I raise issues boldly. The party gives freedom to raise issues.

Is it true that a section in IUML wants to align with CPM?

Yes… If Muslim League aligns with the Left we may get two terms (in power). But the result of an alliance between IUML and CPM will be the growth of the BJP as the main opposition party. This is the basic reason behind our stand that IUML should not align with CPM.

Pinarayi Vijayan has succeeded in winning over a section of Samastha leaders

like Jifri Thangal. Samastha has been a staunch supporter of the IUML...
The Waqf board was functioning smoothly when the LDF government decided to hand over the appointments to the PSC. They have created the issue and when they withdrew the decision under pressure, people are showering praise on them. This was a plan to weaken the Muslim League and drive a wedge between IUML and Samastha. In Malabar, Samastha and IUML are one and the attempt made by the LDF will not succeed. We are confident about our unity.

Are you a candidate for the post of IUML general secretary?
I have no such ambitions. It will not happen in the near future. I will be at the forefront of the efforts to find an efficient general secretary.

What is your definition of an "efficient" general secretary?
Our leader should be someone who can address the problems raised by the new generation of educated women and help them overcome the threats and crises they face. He has to shoulder responsibilities like C H Mohammed Koya did.

Do you think Kunhalikutty is capable of shouldering this responsibility?
The new general secretary should be the person who can shoulder this responsibility. That is the biggest challenge to be faced by the Muslim League leadership. We need to have leaders who can converse with educated women and solve their problems.

In the present political scenario, the UDF has become irrelevant as the governor has taken over the role of opposition leader… How does IUML look at it?
We are watching it closely. If the chief minister was fighting the governor for a cause he would have got public support. Now the doubt is who the bigger thief is…

You had made some comments against Yusuffali M A, which triggered a controversy. Do you still stand by your assessment?
I didn't say anything against Yusuffali. I didn't even name him. I raised an issue. I stopped raising it as the issue is no more relevant.

There is an allegation that the Muslim community in India is becoming more

rigid at a time when the Islamic nations are becoming more liberal…

The allegation of becoming more rigid in the name of religion is against religion. Not just Iran; any country that does not respect human values cannot be justified.