

The 'Rights' Issue

PEOPLE ARE JITTERY EVERYWHERE, THEIR FEARS ALMOST endless. A financially crippled administration, the implosion of the 'Reforms' bubble; all on top of spiking essential commodity prices, the threat of new areas of ethnic confrontation—any one of these, or yet something else could hasten the process of disintegration of whatever remains of social equilibrium, particularly in rural India. But the so-called development strategists have enormous faith in propaganda parade because they think it sells. All the time they talk about rights only to avoid much needed discussion about the toiling-class anxieties that have led so many Indian peasants and workers into 'suicide camp'. The development drum-beat also drowns out leftist populism and communist demagogues are being systematically driven to the margins of right extremism, at least in the field of economic policy orientation.

As people are being bombed with so many development miracles and 'Rights' issues, they simply ignore them. Now the rights crusaders talk about one more fundamental right—right to water. United Nations' Human Rights statement on right to water does not differ from dozens of UN declarations regarding welfare of the six billion plus, fortunate and unfortunate inhabitants of the planet earth. After all this international society, rather a talking shop, is not burdened by responsibility for the implementation of those pious resolutions. So the 26-day March for Right to Water that started in Varanasi and ended at Delhi on October 5, did not create any impact on the people who desperately need safe drinking water. While about 1.1 billion people, mostly in third world countries lack access to safe drinking water, 2.4 billion virtually live in sub-human conditions without any sanitation system. The poor and marginalised in Indian urban ghettos and backward villages are again the worst-hit. It is now common knowledge that in India a large number of elderly and children die everyday from avoidable water-related diseases and yet they never get tired of chanting the slogan of 'safe drinking water for all'.

Whether they admit it or not, water crisis may reach a critical point anytime soon even in water-laden Gangetic plains if the authorities continue to allow unrestricted mining of ground water by companies, foreign and domestic, for manufacturing and marketing packaged water and soft drinks.

In the neo-liberal regime water is a commodity, a source of lucrative quick money. So they are leasing out rivers, vast water bodies, depriving the rural people of their traditional right to water. Right to water can no longer be taken for granted by the virtue of birth. It was unthinkable even two decades ago. It is history—the concept of birth right over natural resources.

Peasants in rural India are losing their right to land and water as well. The Universal Declaration of Human Rights assuming access to safe water to all now mocks at itself. The poor cannot have free drinking water any more. So there is murmur in political circles that something is to be done. And a harmless march—*padayatra*—for right to water is fine. The political left in India is more concerned about recurring communal rights but the days are not for when recurring water riots would regularly hit the headlines.

Tragically enough land is no longer an agitational issue for the political left. Nor does water get any priority that it deserves in their action programme. All are busy to destroy water bodies.

In essence right to water means right to life. And it is being denied to vast majority of people because water is now big business. Democrats and liberals, not to speak of official communists who have no time to think over water, opposing neo-liberalism, look totally incapable of doing anything substantial to highlight the 'right to water' issue. And environmentalists remain satisfied to see some semi-urban water pools get undisturbed by promoters. But reckless privatisation of water resources, particularly in rural areas has already created a panic situation, threatening limited access to safe water people still have.

This is South Asia—the most populous region in the World—and there is no possibility of making this water issue an issue for all without mobilising the affected in their millions. The official response to mark UN declaration makes no sense as ground reality demands something more. ❧❧❧