

Freedom From Poverty

August 15 and it was one more ritualistic occasion for soul-searching in the ruling establishment. Fifty-nine years later it was the same old story of 'back to square one'. To mark this year's independence day they primarily tried to focus on poverty—rather poverty eradication—and threat to national security. But the real threat to security and freedom as well stems from lack in public investment—in education, labour intensive industries, transportation, energy and health-care. The essence of what exists in India is not participatory democracy but manipulated elitist democracy for the privileged and political institutions to ensure privileges of the few. Thus all state sponsored celebrations are the elites' exclusive celebrations. They are 'virtual' in-house though performed outdoor to project them as public celebrations. And August 15 was no different.

The people at the bottom of the economic ladder at the end of this fiscal 2006-07, as targeted by the Planning Commission, will be 220 million or 22 crore. The corresponding figure for 2004 is 250 million or 25 crore. If these three crore poor people are somehow moved above the so-called poverty line, then the poverty level of the country as a whole will be reduced to a more or less respectable figure below 20 percent to 19.34 percent to be specific. And that is the target of Planning Commission on behalf of the left supported-Congress-led UPA government at the Centre. With this much poverty India's ruling elites are dreaming of getting a berth in the developed group of nations. More than that the left, centre and right political leaders of the ruling class are reminded by their overseas masters, that these 25 crore starving people if ignited by revolutionary ideas can spark a fire that will gather such momentum as to throw all their plans in the region in jeopardy, and out of gear.

And that is not the only cause of fear. They are caught stealing above 500 calories from poor Indians' dietary provisions. In 1969 the Planning Commission accepted the norm of 2400 calories of energy per capita for rural areas and 2100 calories of energy per capita for urban areas as the basis of drawing the poverty line. The Expert Group appointed with this bottom line and upon consultation with the Consumer Price Indices for Agricultural Labourers (CPIAL), for Industrial Workers (CPIIW) and for Non-Manual Workers (CPINM) translated the bottom line into monthly per capita expenditure (MPCE) in terms of rupees. The MPCE figures vary *pari passu* variations in the above-mentioned consumer price indices. The required daily allowance (RDA) is determined accordingly. But since 1999-2000 fiscal the RDA figures have been arbitrarily fixed in such a way that "at this expenditure a person could access only 1890 calories, over 500 calories per day below the (actual) RDA". The rulers have thus been caught cheating and looting. If the 2400 calories norm is put in place rigorously, it has been calculated, that 74.5 percent of rural Indian people are still languishing below the poverty line. But by their official method of estimation the ruling class tries to leave out 47.5 percent of total rural population or around 350 million poor villagers from the BPL list. The academic apologists of the existing dispensation are in favour of getting the poverty line redefined. Actually they have the lowering of the poverty line in mind. They try to show that the 2400/2100 calorie-norm is "too high". Against this backdrop some economists have come forward with facts,

figures and explanations showing, in the first place, that the 2400/2100 calorie-based line is actually starvation line and the poverty line should be revised upward at 3000/2700 calories per capita in-take norm. But all these dissents with regard to the level of poverty could have long ago been rubbished by the Indian Parliament in the way they have recently rubbished the “office of profit” issue to justify theft of public money as virtue, robbery as valour, or in the way a retired Chief Justice of India bent facts to mend holes in the UN Volcker Report to exonerate the ruling Congress Party while fixing poor Natawar Singh as the sole “non-contractual beneficiary” in the notorious enterprise of fleecing the starved Iraqi nation with the ridiculous twist that the minister misused his position but took no money. The Planning Commission, the Indian Parliament the Supreme Court of India separately or jointly could issue the ruling that whatever was done on the poverty front by the ruling elites was just and therefore irreversible. They could easily put such a heavy blanket on the issue as to make it non-negotiable. They could not because they dared not. They did not fear the unorganised mass of Indian poor. They feared the World Bank, their supermaster. The World Bank intervened, although indirectly. The World Bank said that on the basis of their international poverty line of the most critical type based on US\$ 1 per day (which one can call starvation line), in India for the year 1999-2000 people below this line were of the order of 34.7 percent and if the criterion of US\$ 2 per day (poverty line) is made the standard then 80 percent of Indians are below the poverty line. ❧❧

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