

LETTERS

SAVING FOOD HAWKERS

While there has been a lot of understandable resentment over court orders banning all cooking by vendors (except the preparation of tea and coffee), somehow enough attention has not been given to the fact that the Supreme Court has gracefully provided enough room to still save Delhi's street food, if only the government is still willing.

A careful recording of the Supreme Court's order dated May 17, 2007 (writ petition civil 1699 of 1987) says, "It is submitted before us that the schemes which have been approved by this Court must be subject to any Act or Rules that may be framed in consonance with the National Policy on Urban Street Vendors. It goes without saying that we have approved the schemes as framed by the MCD and NDMC. If the legislature intervenes and frames another scheme or regulations governing such schemes, that will certainly supersede the schemes prepared by the MCD and NDMC. It is well settled that any administrative action is always subject to law that may be framed by the competent legislature.

So the door is still open for the "competent legislature" to enact legislation which can save thousands of livelihoods while also keeping intact the street food option of many times more people. There is a firm base for such legislation in the National Policy for Urban Street Vendors passed in year 2004 by the Govt. of India's Ministry of Urban Development and Poverty Alleviation. This policy states that street vendors have a right to livelihood and it is the duty of the state to protect the rights of vendors. This policy seeks to ensure that vendors get recognition for their contribution to society, and helping vendors is seen as a means of alleviating urban poverty.

In addition there are several well-researched academic studies which support the positive role of food vendors in particular. Even the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations has stated that the food hawkers provide nutrition at the cheapest possible price (on average a customer pays Rs. 8 for 1000 calories). In recent times the claims of food vendors for protection and encouragement have been strengthened by the fact that some of them have taken initiative on their own to improve hygiene and provide clean, healthy food to customers. Such initiatives would have advanced even more but for the numerous problems faced by the food vendors at the hands of the authorities.

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TO REBEL IS JUSTIFIED

It is gratifying to extend our greetings to Forward Bloc, a junior partner of CPM-led left front for their voice of protest against the steady intrusion of native corporate houses and MNCs in the retail sector in West Bengal. It is also more encouraging when FB's student wing launches direct attacks on retail outlets of Reliance group in West Bengal. The simmering discontent against the gobbling up of the huge retail business by Reliance, Metro group, Spencer, Walmart-Bharti. etc. now finds fitting expressions in Jharkhand, UP, Kerala, etc. And Forward Bloc's student wing has now materialized the direct attacks

simultaneously against 'Left' Front government's dirty policy of opening the retail trade to the Indian monopoly houses and MNCs and against the retail outlets of Reliance.

Is there any iota of doubt that the Left Front can ever act in the interests of the common people, be they workers, peasants, other toilers, students, small traders, etc.? Is it not rank hypocrisy of such a govt. in West Bengal when it pretends to be anti-globalization, privatizations and liberalizations but devotedly pursues such dreadful policies? Is it not a fact that the open-hearted invitation of left government to the big corporates in West Bengal shall invite doom to three crore people comprising hawkers, small traders, small shop owners etc.

The old adage still holds, "Better late than never". The CPI (Maoist) will always make a common cause with any force that really wants to do battle against the reactionary forces out to destroy common people and their livelihoods in the country.

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Secretary, West Bengal State Committee CPI (Maoist)