

NOTE

## The Railway Budget 08-09

A B writes :

Immediately after the sub-mission of the railway budget a leading English daily commented "Poll-bound populist and profit-maker, all rolled into one." But this daily did not devote a single line to what is perhaps the most important feature of the budget, namely the decision to appoint *coolies* to the posts of gang men. In a situation where retrenchment and non-fulfilment of vacancies are two basic features of the organized sector, this step is bold and somewhat unique in kind. Besides, there are some other steps that should benefit common passengers. The decision to provide personnel to unmanned railway level crossings should be welcome. The decision to build toilets to prevent the fall of wastes and human excreta on railway tracks is also not unwelcome. Finally, there is the decision to reduce fares a little, although reduction in the fares of air-conditioned coaches is questionable. It is very interesting that champions of 'liberalization', those who seem to do well in this era of imperialist-sponsored globalization are critical of Lalu Prasad Yadav for his populist measures. On the other hand, it can be said that considerations of vote may put a brake on the increasingly iniquitous economic measures of the government.

Not everything is to be lauded of course. For example, privatization of catering services will harm rather than better the quality of services. The cancer of privatization afflicts the railway minister also. The behaviour of the CPI(M) MPs from West Bengal cannot but evoke fun. The ruling Left Front Government of Bengal has meekly accepted the Central Government's guidelines for the measurement of poverty, which are, for all practical purposes, meant to reduce the number of the poor and thus to hurt the poor permanently. Thus the state government shared the central conspiracy to deprive the poor of their legitimate rights. Now the CPI(M) MPs stage a walk out in protest against the deprivation of West Bengal; West Bengal has not been given as many new trains as they wished. Such a mock-protest can take neither the protesters nor the State they are representing very far.

Yes, populism is there. Similarly privatization is there also. The railway budget reflects a familiar pattern of recent Indian politics. Indian ruling classes cannot defy the IMF, the World Bank, and their Indian supporters who are appropriating a disproportionate share of India's economic growth. On the other hand, they cannot do away with their old populism, which is necessary for winning by doing well in the elections. It is of course difficult to reconcile the two. One may turn to Mr Manmohan Singh the economist prime minister for an explanation. □□□