

## A Convenient Solution

While addressing the nation on the eve of the 61st Republic Day President Pratibha Patil called for the second Green Revolution. Whether the “revolutionaries” would listen to her appeal is altogether a different matter. But for the time being the politicians and regulators who have it in their power to do something about the rocketing prices of essential commodities, particularly food items from staple to common vegetables, are finally paying attention. This is what their discourse on food inflation looks like. Maybe, this is a fire-fighting exercise by the Union Cabinet Committee on Prices (CCP) because the budget session is round the corner. Faced with continuing flak from the Opposition the CCP mooted the idea of increasing ration quota of rice and wheat to the poor by 10 kg per family for January and February only. But additional food grains won't cost less. With the minimum support price of Rs 10.80 per kg for wheat and Rs 15.37 per kg for rice, actual selling prices at ration shops would be Rs 11.50 and Rs 17 respectively. So said the spokesmen of ration dealers. As the new prices are higher than the existing targeted public distribution scheme prices the much-publicised plan of public distribution system is unlikely to deliver. There is no way to tame market through adhocism because the persons in authority being the ardent champions of *lessez faire* are in no mood to control prices. The official left was at least right in criticising the union government's ad hoc measure as it would invite food inflation in whatever remains of the existing public distribution mechanism itself. But on price rise issue the official and not-so official leftists have no agenda other than periodically raising noises about distribution of 14 essential commodities through fair price shops. The hard fact is that fair-price shops are totally unfair in regulating distribution of subsidised rations for the people living below poverty line, not to speak of 'above poverty line' card holders. Corruption is so rampant and all-pervasive that people have very little faith in rationing system.

Democracy in this part of the globe is being interpreted in a way that is hardly democratic. No political party looks eager to listen to the people's outcry. At stake is election-time promise of eradication of poverty and the credibility of Congress-led united progressive alliance (UPA) government. A great lie of politics is that people are being asked to believe that the government is seriously trying to make the price level tolerable. All their efforts are aimed at wrapping the will of the people. No matter where the debate on food inflation takes the people, the left's commitment to get rid of this unbearable environment seems too clever by half. The crisis is literally heading towards an undeclared famine situation and yet their casual approach is too inadequate to articulate people's aspirations and fight the almighty market god. True, food riot is not reported from any part of the country but even riot of any kind requires a little bit of political awareness.

Come what may it's now an open secret that sugar lobby can always manipulate the market to reap super profit. The reason is simple : sugar barons serve as special-interest donors in electoral gambling, particularly in northern and western states.

With the retail market showing no signs of cooling down in the immediate future, it is now the blame game. Congress party itself is a divided house over

how to ease market heat. In truth different ministries are working at cross-purposes. Interestingly some of the Congress partners in UPA are behaving in a peculiar way, hopefully to skid their share of responsibility—or irresponsibility. While they blame it on UPA's faulty policy for the unprecedented price rise, they never spell out the correct policy they could offer. In reality they have no policy other than dancing to the tune of spontaneity. As for the main Opposition—Bharatiya Janata Party—the less said the better. Being a party of traders in the main it maintains a guarded silence while making occasional outbursts, rather harmless outbursts over the price rise issue.

Food crisis despite buffer stocks in government warehouses! But the left has no viable programme to confront the Centre on real issues that affect the common man's living standards. And the far left doesn't think there is any potential in anti-price rise movement developing into a broad mass upsurge anytime soon. They are not even interested in utilising fissures in the ruling camp, coming out over the price rise issue and introduction of GM food in a commercial way.

The other day Union Agriculture Minister Sharad Pawar, though getting flak from his own colleagues in the cabinet over the price rise, was candid enough to admit the impending danger lying in introduction of Bt brinjal. They are actually issuing a prescription of disaster for India's traditional agriculture. Also, the controversy is raging over the idea of banning milk and milk products. Mr Pawar's contention that milk is being diverted to prepare casein or calcium caseinate (milk protein) for higher profits in a situation where there is already a gap of 18 lakh tonnes between demand and supply, is not totally baseless. But finally it's business as usual. Farmers committed suicide in mostly Bt cotton areas and Bt brinjal is likely to give multinational agri-business an irreversible leverage to decide future of India's agriculture.

Anti-American, rather so-called anti-imperialist stance of the official left is practically meaningless because what is required is to launch a 'quit India' movement to defeat the conspiracy of global corporations to ruin small and traditional farming. □□□