

Wandering in the Wilderness

This market horror is the everyday reality for hundreds of thousands of people—price rise—and yet market is the buzzword in the corridors of power. Union Finance Minister, Pranab Mukherjee, being a harried man at the moment, is de facto losing control over whatever remains of regulation regime and India's destiny as well. Faced with no possibility of taming inflation—food inflation shot up to 11.47 percent towards the end of August from 10.38 percent a week earlier—Mr Mukherjee somehow summoned courage, while speaking at the 179th Annual Conference of the Calcutta Chamber of Commerce, to assure the most vulnerable sections of society that they would strengthen the Public Distribution System (PDS) to ensure people availability of foodgrains. But they have already dismantled the basic structure of PDS, following the dictates of their overseas lords. And what is there in the name of PDS in some states, is corrupt to the core, having no chance of getting overhauled anytime soon.

The apex court of the country had recently observed that the fair price shops were totally bogged down in corruption. For a long time the petty traders of the ruling party have a say in the running of these shops, rather unfair shops. They simply pass on these shops to private operators on rent, who have no noble idea other than deceiving the gullible PDS cardholders. The co-operative stores have become akin to the housing co-operative societies where the land sharks prevailed over the affairs of the societies and they just looted the common man at will championing co-operative culture.

It is common knowledge that PDS food grains are being sold by adulterating them. Sugar and Kerosene are being given away to the hotels and petrol pumps. Both the centre and the states are accusing one another with the centre saying that the states fail to lift the allotted quota of food grains and their distribution system is far from satisfactory. And the states in turn charge the centre with not making full supply of the PDS commodities. Result : ration-cardholders suffer in cross-fire.

Indications are that they are all out to systematically de-control every aspect of the economy. What they periodically dish out for public consumption does hold little water. Only the other day Surface Transport Minister Kamal Nath questioned the need of the Planning Commission by calling them “armchair advisers”. In other words they are really serious about shooting down the premier Nehruvian model of economic management. Maybe, they will take some time to kill it but they are working on it. Nehru was much impressed by the Russian experience of state control. But western economies had developed much by embracing the free market model in the last 150 years. And Russia had managed to achieve almost the same level in a short span of just 30 years under a public sector-led strategy. India's Planning Commission was supposed to replicate the Russian success. No, this didn't happen.

Now with the Russian model gone leaving voluminous archives materials for researches and historians, the inheritors of Nehru dynasty in India find no valid reason to stick to the concept of state intervention, though prime minister is the chair of the Planning Commission. They are singularly obsessed with achieving 10 percent growth

rate and creating in the process a *lessiez faire* atmosphere. True, they still give direction to some high-growth sectors like mobile telephony, reinforcing the role of government but at the end of the day it is private players and chambers of commerce who call the shot.

The country is burning. Air-conditioned shopping malls are displacing poor artisans in the villages, making them destitutes and daily wage labourers. Ironically, productive activities of farmers and industrialists are facing labour shortage while labour power is wasted in unproductive employment guarantee scheme. Then the Planning Commission is actually manned by retired bureaucrats who are more interested in making India a developed economy within a very short period, without bothering about ground reality. As for the Planning Commission the guilty is the sitting judge in appeal but the Kamal Nath's are just echoing the idea of unregulated market and less government.

No doubt the common man is enraged at every level but to date growing popular outrage has hardly challenged the corporate power despite the phenomenal spread of 'maoist menace' in central India and elsewhere.

India is not China where capitalist growth is like the "flows of Yangtze rushing to the East". India is unlikely to succeed like capitalist China. Whether China can displace the US as the dominant global player in the near future is open to question but India doesn't really figure in the global power game, albeit the Singhs and Mukherjees hope, somewhat against hope, that people across the globe will soon recognise India's importance in world theatre. The Chinese renaissance, if it can be so called is typically Chinese with roots in Chinese metamorphism and national interests, notwithstanding unprecedented openness. They have not lost control over their destiny but it is not really the case with India. □