

Growing Pains

Hungry people are not peaceful. That was former US President Jimmy Carter opined in 1999. Then he went a step further—‘there can be no peace until people have enough to eat.’ But Indian ruling elites are lucky enough in the sense that there is no mass upsurge despite mounting inflation and soaring food prices. They are lucky in the sense that people remain satisfied with their gospel of inclusive growth though the ground reality is otherwise. The below poverty-line people are on the rise and starvation death is so prevalent that it is being simply ignored these days in the mainstream media. While presenting the UPA Government’s annual report card for the year 2010-11 Prime Minister Manmohan Singh said they would seek to contain food inflation through measures for higher production of various agricultural products and minimise the impact of high fuel prices on ‘poor and vulnerable’ sections of the society. There is no let up in food inflation though it has been a major concern for all for long.

True, food prices have risen everywhere but the problem is complex for more than one reason in India. Government godowns are overflowing with foods and rotting staples will soon become unfit for human consumption. The vast majority of people have no purchasing power but they won’t distribute food free, lest prices go down in the open market. Then it is a global phenomenon.

It is in the third world countries that the price hikes have been highest, and there is nothing, apart from war, like the on-set of hunger to fuel social unrest. The recent mass uprisings in Egypt, Tunisia and other parts of the Arab world are universally recognised to be related to the escalating cost of staple foods in those countries.

The Manmohan Singhs are not interested in history. Nor do they have much time to ponder over historical lessons. They no longer talk of India becoming an economic super-power in the immediate future. They are struggling hard to project India as a middle-income country, free of the burden on poverty, ignorance and disease that has held human resources for so long. But as per the World Bank criteria India at the moment is ranked among lower-middle-income economies alongwith countries like Sri Lanka, China, Pakistan, Iraq and Indonesia. The grouping is definitely frustrating for the advocates of high growth syndrome. Then Mr Singh didn’t say a word or two while releasing the annual report card when India would move into the ranks of middle-income countries. The deadline may be 2050 or beyond.

For one thing food inflation may turn their paradise into hell. The French Revolution was triggered by a bread crisis. The genocide that racked and disgraced Rwanda in 1994 was related to destitution caused by a world collapse in the price of coffee, Rwanda’s principal export, on which its entire economy was dependent.

About a billion people suffer from chronic hunger in the world today, and a further 2 billion are estimated to be malnourished. About 3.5 million children under 5 in developing countries die from under nutrition-related causes each year. In Haiti things are so bad that people have resorted to eating mud. Tribal India does not fare better than Haiti though the Manmohan Singhs have reasons, may be wrong reasons, to cheer about 8.5 growth rate from 2004-05 to 2010-11 despite a severe financial crisis or what they call melt-down in 2008-09.

There is no absolute shortage of food stuffs produced in the world but the problem lies elsewhere—food is not equitably distributed. Even by conservative estimates half of total global food is simply thrown away or destroyed to keep the market hot as per the findings of the Stockholm based International Water Institute. In other words sufficient food to feed 3 billion people, half the world’s population, is wasted.

While the masses all over the world are hit by unprecedented hikes in food prices, the rates of profit for agri-business are more than healthy. Then spoilage claims 30 percent of India’s fresh produce, while post-harvest losses of vegetables and fruit in some African countries can reach 50

percent says the 'World Vegetable Center'. Also, the conversion of food into biofuels would raise food prices to such an extent that the number of people in the world suffering from hunger would rise by 50 percent from 1 billion to 1.5 billion. India again would be worst affected as the inclusive growth strategists of the Manmohan Singh brigade are hell bent to add more and more acres to bio-fuel plant cultivation.

After all globalisation means huge monopolies and financial mechanisms controlling the economies and political institutions—and the lives of people, not just in the area of food but in every sphere of economic activity. Surprisingly, food rather food price, never figures in left discourse and as for the far left the less said the better because they are more interested in revolution, not food agitation. □□□