

POLLS AND PALLIATIVES

Sonia Gandhi's foot-soldiers continue to Congratulate themselves for the 'pro-people' soft budget though the poor, particularly the rural poor have no option but to pay with their lives. With fallout from the mounting inflationary pressure and rising prices, suddenly India's political scenario overshadows the much-talked about farmer-friendly budget as an issue in the next general election which, even technically speaking, is just a year away. All political parties, left and right alike, are busy to indulge in shadow-boxing without addressing the life and death problem of starving millions. Toilers create value and social equilibrium as well, bubbles don't. Years of deregulation and decontrol seem to have unleashed a speculative growth bubble, the collapse of which now threatens to take down the economy. While the official left is not interested even in tokenism by organising a protest rally or two against price rise, the saffron right, the main Opposition in parliament looks too relaxed to derive comfort from its patent formula of minority appeasement-exercise of the ruling dispensation. All of them believe in the time-tested 'principle' that the best way to solve a problem is not to solve it.

As they cannot think of labour-intensive industrialisation anymore, whatever remains of traditional industrial base has virtually turned into Dickensian authoritarian workhouse, sucking production away from floors and forcing thousands of low-paid labourers to migrate from one region to another simply for survival. If traditional industry is dying, non-traditional (or capital-intensive high tech) sector is growing at a snail's pace without offering any possibility of reducing unemployment level to tolerable limits. Despite so much euphoria over India's economic might industrial growth, as measured by the index of industrial production slipped to 5.3 percent in January, less than half of what was recorded in the same month last year, because of poor showing by all sectors of the industries. The reserve army of the unemployed is fluid, including all those workers now losing their jobs. For half the world's population, nearly three billion people who live on less than two dollars a day, being part of the global unemployed means near total deprivation. And India's share of that deprivation is maximum.

With essential commodities including food items getting dearer and village poor losing subsistence farming because of globalisation, the so-called budgetary sops will be of no help to arrest the multiplication of farmers' suicide squads! As vegetable oils are being increasingly diverted to bio-diesel fuel, they are simply priced out of the world's poor. And India cannot be an exception. The price of palm oil, a staple in the diet of many of the world's poor rose 70 percent in a year. There is no explanation from India's dream merchants why edible oil market like India's stock markets, had become so volatile—showing the real face of manipulated inflation mechanism. The abnormal rise in price of food staples in recent months has affected even the middle class, otherwise passive to the plight of the semi-starved people of India. Unlike sub-Saharan African countries, India has not yet witnessed food riot but the ruling authorities will have to open gruel kitchens to stop starvation deaths anytime soon if the situation worsens further.

If there are no food riots, it is because masses, being continually misled by vested political interests, are more prone to communal passions, religious or otherwise. Ethnic strife has been endemic to India's body politic. So is communal divide. As sporadic communal outbursts occur in different regions, almost with a regular interval, the persons in authority have reasons to reiterate the fact that people are unwilling to rebel. Mass anger and desperation, sometimes reflected in ballot fails to change the ground reality.

The parties, gearing up for the next general election, don't challenge the sub-human conditions, people are being forced to live in. All embrace globalisation—the corporate-all atmosphere that enshrines the principle of free movement of things, commodities and capital. And the prevailing corporate culture forces poor peasants off the land or migrating for work across the states. In all cases they have few or no rights as workers because even limited social security measures built over the years, have virtually disappeared, resulting in colossal human disasters.

Across the length and breadth of the country, anarchy is growing fast, playing an increasingly political and, in some areas, violent-role. Given the depth of ensuing crisis polls can hardly offer any meaningful palliatives, not to speak of an alternative, no matter what election managers of registered political parties are saying—or not saying. □□□