

Looking Back

The poor have no right to rest even for a few days, election or no election. The ever deteriorating financial crisis is not the only problem they confront day in and day out, there is another, worse one, because it is not related to the means of production and distribution, but existence itself. It is climate change. And it is creating havoc in many parts of the country as the recent *Aila* cyclonic storm in South Bengal delta has shown how vulnerable the poor are to natural disaster. While the persons in power at the centre are busy to debate over how to celebrate their proverbial first 100 days, poor Indians continue to pay the most for food—and also for health. One Indian doctor is available for every 1,325 Americans in the US, but only one Indian doctor for every 2,200 Indians. Approximately 30 percent of doctors in the National Health Service of the UK are Indian expatriates. Inevitably, public health services in rural India are under-staffed by over 50 percent. Then who bothers about India's apex court's notable judgements linking the right to health with the right to life. After all no political party promised paradise to the people during their hectic election campaigns. So they have no compulsion to tame the market and do something concrete in respect of social and economic justice.

In truth they are now allowing the market to go wild forcing more and more wage earners, not to speak of vast multitudes who have very little purchasing power, to curtail consumption as a way out to save the situation. But prices are soaring and soaring defying the logic of continuing decline in inflation rates.

Just on the eve of the 15th parliamentary poll they reduced the price of petrol and diesel, hopefully to buy vote. And now they are all set to increase it again, inducing yet another bout of chain reaction in the market. Also, they are planning to sell government stakes in India's oil majors while allowing them to fix prices as they please. Denationalisation of profit-making public sector units is the buzz word in the corridors of power because they think they have no other option to raise revenue to meet the whopping budgetary deficits. They are indulging in denationalisation exercise at a time when even diehard free marketeers in the West and America, are announcing a series of bail out, rather nationalisation by the back door, to get rid of the crisis and global meltdown.

With more and more labour-intensive industries downing their shutters joblessness in the organised sector has reached an all time high, producing social tensions and violent outbursts everywhere, even on flimsy grounds.

Surprisingly, price-rise is no longer a political issue for agitation by the left. Everybody thinks it is as natural as anything else. The official left has long abandoned it as an area of mass mobilisation. As for the far left the less said the better. They too toy with the conception—or misconception—that they have nothing to do in this neo-liberal regime when it is the question of price rise. But they can do all this at their own peril, denying their own past. If today official left is powerful in some regions it is because of their past popular struggles against the tyranny of the market and political forces that backed it. One reason Bengal Marxists are enjoying privileges of the super rich these days is their active involvement in the bloody food movement in the early years of Congress rule.

They have already made industrial labour docile by refusing to agitate for legitimate rights otherwise guaranteed under law. And they have no action programme for broad masses, particularly poor, marginal and landless peasants, who are unlikely to vanish from the rural scene despite massive conversion of fertile agricultural land into industrial estates and SEZs.

In today's political milieu all parties, regional or mainstream (i.e. national) are election-oriented. Some even close their shops after polls. The left too thinks only in terms of election. They never talk of broader issues and radical change.

And in parliament their verbal duel over this issue or that is so insignificant and irrelevant that most people do not take note of it. Right now the controversial Women's Reservation Bill is getting currency and everybody knows it is more like fire sans smoke. The Bill seeks to set aside 33 percent seats for women in both states legislatures and the Lok Sabha. But caste overlords of north India oppose it, they want quota within quota, albeit it is a political reservation and not a religion or caste-based reservation. Then in India's backward feudal culture talking reservation is good for the passive population and even better for the imagination. □□□