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Manmohan's Model of Governance: : Markets that Behave like Maharajas

Facing flak all around for the runaway prices, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh reaffirmed his commitment to liberalisation in a recent speech and declared, "In ancient India, a monarch was regarded as a good king if he did not interfere too much in the life of the people. That has been our guiding principle as well." There's a method in Manmohan's choice of models of governance: in his speech at Oxford, he was moved to praise the British Raj as a model of "good governance"; and in a speech in November 2007, he declared that "democracy has its disadvantages", recounting wistfully how his friend, an IMF official, had admired an "authoritarian" regime in Korea because it was capable of ordering changes its economic policies within half an hour, on the whims of the President! And this time, he has equated the unfettered march of the market with benign monarchy.

It is interesting that Manmohan chose the metaphor of the feudal monarch to defend capitalist tenets of laissez faire liberalisation. The feudal Raja, after all, levied taxes but had no accountability towards the poor peasant praja; the latter were supposed to be grateful as long as he wasn't too free with barbaric intrusions into their lives.

In the case of the liberalised Indian State, however, the 'non-intrusive state' proves to be not much more than a myth. The "hands off" policy is not uniformly applicable to all. It's "hands off" as far as the Government's commitments towards the poor are concerned; likewise towards public services like drinking water, electricity, and so on. In the "free" market, people are free to starve, peasants are free to commit suicide. But the state's policy towards the corporates is far from "hands off." Instead, you have handsome sops, generous tax breaks, whopping waivers, and special zones of exemptions for the corporates all around. Even in the US, which preaches the mantra of the free market most ardently to the rest of the world, we saw a major investment bank, Bear Stearns, being bailed out for 30 million dollars by the US Government, and Britain has nationalised a major mortgage bank.

The only time a "hands-off" policy is pursued towards corporates is when they indulge in criminal violations of the law. Take the case of Dow Chemicals (which bought up the infamous Union Carbide responsible for the Bhopal gas disaster in 1984). In February 2007, Dow caught for paying more than Rs. 80 lakhs in bribes to Indian agriculture ministry officials to register three toxic pesticides, including one (Dursban) that is prohibited for domestic use in the US owing to its proven toxic effects on the mental development of children. But Dow continues to produce and distribute Dursban in India, claiming that is safe for "humans and pets". A notorious criminal, guilty of poisoning several generations in Bhopal, is being allowed to bribe its way in and continue poisoning children in India. Not just that, the UPA Government, in spite of the determined protests of Union Carbide's victims who have been protesting in Delhi for several weeks now, is bent on welcoming Dow to do business in India, and the Prime Minister himself has refused outright to prosecute Dow for violating Indian laws or bribing officials.

Maharaja Manmohan treats killers like Dow with kid gloves, but he along with all rulers in India treat the protesting poor and all dissenters with an iron hand. Binayak Sen continues to languish in jail for an year in Chhattisgarh, while the UPA Government defends the same Salwa Judum (whose

constitutionality Sen had challenged) in Supreme Court.

In the days of the maharajas, famines were not uncommon. And under the British Raj that Manmohan admired, famines flourished because peasants were forced to grow cash crops rather than food. Today, again, hunger and price rise are not because of any natural calamity. Rather, following in the footsteps of the British Raj, the Manmohan Government and its predecessor governments since the onset of liberalisation, too encouraged peasants to shift to cash crops; grabbed agricultural land for SEZs and real estate; allowed big traders and MNCs to buy direct from the farmers; made MSPs unstable and undependable, thus forcing peasants to sell to private players; dismantled the PDS coverage; introduced cheap wheat imports; encouraged hoarding and futures trading – and therefore inexorably ushered in starvation, food crisis and backbreaking price rise. All the while, in the best traditions of the Nero-like monarchs, Manmohan has fiddled while people's lives are on fire. Clearly, the fact is not that the state has refrained from interference; the question is: in favour of whom have governments interfered? Governments have interfered to price out the poor and pamper the rich.

Manmohan has perhaps forgotten how monarchy was given marching orders by the people in neighbouring Nepal; his government might meet the same fate if the Government continues to show the same cool callousness towards runaway prices and the distress of the poor.

Long Live the Legacy of the May Day Martyrs

In 1884, the Federation of Organized Trades and Labor Unions passed a resolution stating that eight hours would constitute a legal day's work from and after May 1, 1886. Chicago was the centre of this rising working class movement for the 8-hour working day, with the International Working People's Association at the forefront. On May 3, 1886, police fired into a crowd of strikers at the McCormick Reaper Works Factory, killing four and wounding many. As a mass meeting the next day in Haymarket Square to protest the brutality was ending, a bomb was thrown at the police, killing one. Police responded by firing into the crowd, killing one worker and injuring many others.

With this pretext, eight of Chicago's most active labour leaders were charged with conspiracy to murder in connection with the Haymarket bombing. A kangaroo court found all eight guilty, despite a lack of evidence connecting any of them to the bomb-thrower (only one was even present at the meeting, and he was on the speakers' platform), and they were sentenced to die.

Below are excerpts from the court-room speech of one of the Haymarket 8, August Spies:

"I believe that the state of castes and classes—the state where one class dominates over and lives upon the labor of another class, and calls this order—yes, I believe that this barbaric form of social organization, with its legalized plunder and murder, is doomed to die and make room for a free society... You may pronounce the sentence upon me, honourable judge, but let the world know that in A.D. 1886, in the state of Illinois, eight men were sentenced to death because they believed in a better future; because they had not lost their faith in the ultimate victory of liberty and justice!

...You insist that you are the chosen ones, the sole proprietors. The forces that tossed you into the paradise, the industrial forces, are still at work. They are growing more active and intense from day to day. Their tendency is to elevate all mankind to the same level, to have all humanity share in the paradise you now monopolize. You in your blindness, think you can stop the tidal wave of civilization

and human emancipation by placing a few policemen, a few Gattling guns and some regiments of militia on the shore; you think you can frighten the rising waves back into the unfathomable depths whence they have arisen by erecting a few gallows in the perspective...

...And if you think that you can crush out these ideas that are gaining ground more and more every day, if you think you can crush them out by sending us to the gallows – if you would once more have people suffer the penalty of death because they have dared to tell the truth – and I defy you to show us where we have told a lie – I say, if death is the penalty for proclaiming the truth, then I will proudly and defiantly pay the costly price! Call your hangman!

West Bengal Para Teachers' Struggle

The West Bengal Para Teachers' Association organized a mass agitation on 11 April at Rani Rashmoni Road, Kolkata, against their extremely exploitative job rules and pay package. These teachers have no provision of sick leave all, no yearly increment, no DA or house rent. They get just Rs 1500 (in primary section) and Rs 3000 (in secondary section) per month. Even in the states like Bihar, Sikkim and Uttarakhand para teachers get Rs 5000, Rs 5500, and Rs 6000 per month, but the West Bengal Government which boasts of its school education system, is leaving the para teachers in even worse conditions than in other states.

AICCTU leader Basudev Bose and AISA leader Malay Tiwary addressed thousands of teachers at the demonstration, and spoke of the struggles of para teachers for regularisation and better conditions all over the country. They stressed that the condition of para teachers was caused by the policies of privatisation of education and the diktats of the British funding agency DFID which had been introduced by the LF Govt in W Bengal. They called for linking the teachers' struggle with struggles of other sections of people in West Bengal against the State Govt's policies of liberalisation.

Campaign Against Price Rise

As part of the CPI(ML)'s national campaign against price rise, CPI(ML) activists burnt effigies of Manmohan Singh and Shiela Dixit at Sonia Vihar and Karawal Nagar, and distributed leaflets at Mandavali, Shahdara, and Rohini, and held a street corner meeting at Narela. A demonstration against price rise will be held on the culminating day of the campaign on May Day at Jantar Mantar at Delhi.

The CPI(ML) held anti-price rise demonstrations while observing the party foundation day on April 22 at Valsad and Sabarkantha in Gujarat.

The CPI(ML)'s Belghoria local committee along with some other left organization like MKP, CCR-ML organized many programs including procession, road block, street corner etc through out the month of April against the price rise and the complete inefficiency of both the central and state government regarding this matter. Mass participation was good in all these programs.

Kisan Sangharsh Samiti Submits Memo to PM

The All India Kisan Sangharsh Samiti submitted a memo addressed to the Prime Minister via the Gurgaon Deputy Commissioner raising a range of demands of peasants, farmers and agricultural labourers. The demands of the memo included: an alternative agriculture policy be prepared centring on land reforms; food security and self-reliance be guaranteed; a comprehensive central legislation be created for agricultural labourers; universal coverage of PDS and NREGA be ensured and BPL cards be issued to all rural and agricultural labouring and poor peasant families; all loans of small peasants be waived; all crops grown by peasants be procured by the Government at suitable MSPs immediately and procurement centres be ensured at all panchayats; drinking water, free health care and education be ensured in each village; work should be resumed on the SYL (Sutlej Yamuna Link) Canal project which has been lying pending; interest-free loans and agricultural requirements like at cheap rates be provided; subsidies that have been cut on seeds, fuel and pesticides be resumed; ceiling-surplus and gram sabha lands be distributed amongst poor villagers. The memo was submitted by AIKSS leader and CPI(ML)'s Haryana in-charge Prem Singh Gehlawat as well as activists Naresh Yadav and Dharmpal. The AIKSS memo also demanded action against sky-rocketing prices.

UPA Cabinet Pours Cold Water on Amendments to Sati Law

The Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act was passed in 1987 following the shocking immolation of a young woman, Roop Kanwar in Deorala, Rajasthan. Glorification of sati is a crime in the eyes of this law. Yet, recently a member of the 'secular', 'pro-women' UPA Cabinet, Minister of Mines Sis Ram Ola, defended sati temples in the name of 'traditional mores'!

The UPA Cabinet was considering some amendments to make the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act more stringent. Some of the amendments proposed included making it a non-bailable offence to coerce a woman to commit Sati; prison terms for those committing as well as glorifying sati to be increased to a minimum of three years up to 10 years; heavy fines (increased from Rs 10,000 to Rs 50,000) for a village for participation in an act of sati; and making the panchayat responsible for alerting the police and the district magistrate to any such incident. The amendments were cleared by the group of ministers (GoM) headed by HRD minister nearly a year ago in August 2007. But the UPA Cabinet has now refused to approve the amendments. Not only Sis Ram Ola, but ironically even Science and Technology Minister Kapil Sibal blocked the Cabinet's move to approve the amendments to the Commission of Sati (Prevention) Act, objecting to the proposals to holding the entire village and the panchayat guilty.

We can easily see how these amendments are necessary if we note how people have escaped punishment under the present act. BJP leaders who held a demonstration openly glorifying sati soon after Roop Kanwar's killing were acquitted by a Special Court in 2004, for 'lack of evidence'. The BJP Government of Rajasthan headed by Vasundhara Raje Scindia (whose mother was notorious for openly glorifying sati) has even brought out tourism brochures which glorify sati temples (the govt was forced to withdraw these brochures due to a public uproar by women's groups in Rajasthan).

In the Cabinet meeting, Sis Ram Ola reportedly said the proposals would challenge “existing mores” and asked, “What would happen to the Sati temples and how would the government deal with the tradition of worship at these temples?” Well, Shri Ola, any pro-woman law is bound to challenge existing patriarchal “mores” and “traditions”, and in a modern democratic country, how can a Minister be allowed to suggest that traditions – especially cruel and barbaric traditions like sati – are greater than laws?! In the name of “tradition”, female foeticide, child marriage and sati would all be “justified”!

In the existing Act, even prior to any amendments, sati temples are illegal: according to Section 2(1)(b)(iii) and Section 2(1)(b)(iv) of the Act, arranging any function to eulogise the person who has committed Sati, amounts to glorification of Sati; the creation of a trust, or the collection of funds, or the construction of temple or other structure or the carrying on of any form of worship or the performance of any ceremony with a view to perpetuating the honour of, or to preserve the memory of, a person who has committed Sati also amounts to glorification of Sati. Section 7(1) of the Act even empowers the Government to direct the removal of such temples where sati is glorified. But no Government has ever ordered action under these laws. And Shri Ola, MP from Jhunjhunu, Rajasthan, pretends to be unaware of the above law, and asks “What will happen to the Sati temples and the tradition of worship at these temples?” Eminent lawyer and the UPA’s Minister for Science and Technology too, could not inform his colleague that sati temples are illegal and ought to be demolished by the Government!

The regions of Sikar, Churu and Jhunjhunu are particularly prone to Sati, and Ola, as an MP from Jhunjhunu ought to be prosecuted himself for failing to follow the law and take any action against the sati temples in his constituency. CM Vasundhara Raje also is said to have described Jhunjhunu as the ‘land of sati’ at a Rally.

Interestingly, among the 11 people who were accused (and later acquitted) of glorifying Roop Kanwar’s ‘sati’ was Pratap Singh Khachariawas — nephew of the Vice-President, Bhairon Singh Shekhawat, and former president of Bharatiya Janata Yuva Morcha — who later joined Congress and was fielded as the party’s candidate from Jaipur for the 2004 Lok Sabha elections. Clearly, both BJP and Congress alike are happy to glorify the glorifiers of sati!

The above episode exposes the soft-Hindutva of the Congress and UPA Government, and also the hollowness of their claims of being pro-women. If they are unwilling to prevent women from being burnt alive; if they defend the medieval obscurantist “tradition” of worshipping women who were burnt alive; they have no business to being in the seat of power at the Centre!

Recent Left Victories in Cyprus and Paraguay

In the month of April 2008, the first communist government in the EU was elected at Cyprus, and Left Bishop Fernando Lugo was elected President of Paraguay, unseating the longest ruling party in the world.

Dimitris Christofias won the presidential election in Southern Cyprus with 53 percent of the vote in an unprecedented victory for the island’s Communist AKEL party. This is the first time in AKEL’s 82-year history that it fielded its own presidential candidate, despite being the biggest Greek Cypriot political party and controlling a third of the vote. The most important issue in Cyprus is the partition of the island, especially as Turkish Cyprus is barred from direct international trade, which has a

huge economic and social impact. Christofias is said to be close to the Turkish Cypriot leaders and has promised to move towards reunification of the island.

Reportedly, Christofias' conservative rival raised stale anti-communist propaganda against him, trying to paint him as godless and totalitarian. Comparisons between socialist and market economies, the nature of the Soviet Socialist regimes, poverty, inequality and the capitalist system, religion, nationalism, etc were all issues in the election.

In Paraguay, leftist Lugo defeated his nearest rival, the candidate of the notoriously corrupt Colorado party that has ruled Paraguay since 1947.

Lugo was a Catholic bishop in San Pedro - a poor region in the north of Paraguay - until he was forced to resign his position in 2005 after supporting land invasions by landless workers and their families.

During the election, Lugo called for measures to reduce the stark inequality between rich and poor, for land reform and to renegotiate a hydroelectric treaty with Brazil that was signed in secret in 1973 by the military regimes ruling the two countries at the time.

Paraguay has seen an agricultural boom over the past four years, making it the fourth largest global exporter of soya beans. Yet the majority of poor Paraguayans have no share in this prosperity and many landless workers are fighting for the right to land.

P.S.

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