

Politics in India: Soaring Prices and Manmohan's Nuclear Chess

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They had been talking about double-digit economic growth. Instead, it is inflation which has crossed the double-digit barrier and the upward climb of the price spiral shows no sign of slowing down. As we go to press, officially measured inflation has reached a thirteen-year high, equalling the 1995 level when Manmohan Singh was the Finance Minister in Narsimha Rao's cabinet. The official measurement of inflation is based on the wholesale price index which is obviously quite removed from the actual prices that consumers have to pay at the retail market. But a quick look at the major segments accounting for the rise in wholesale prices – food and food products: 24%, petro products: 17%, iron and steel: 10% – gives us a clear idea of how badly the poor and fixed-income consumers are being hurt.

Even as prices of all essential commodities soar sky-high, the United Progressive Alliance (UPA) government keeps telling us that this inflation is a global phenomenon and we have to bear with it. Instead of taking urgent measures to douse the flame, the government has instead chosen to fan the fire by dutifully passing on the 'global' burden to the people at home. How does it help to know that the fire raging in the Indian market is 'imported' from abroad when prices of every local produce are going through the roof! Having broken down every potential protective barrier and opened up the entire economy to all kinds of external assaults, the UPA government can now hardly excuse itself by attributing the inflationary surge to global economic factors.

History tells us that when Rome was burning, Emperor Nero was busy playing his violin. In today's India, when the market is aflame, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh is busy playing nuclear chess. Media reports have it that Singh has offered to resign if he cannot push through his favourite nuclear deal with the US. The mainstream media is also more perturbed over the future of the deal than the crushing blow inflicted by soaring prices. Indeed, inflation is being seen as a spoilsport of sorts by the pro-deal lobby. The deal enthusiasts are wary that clinching the deal at this stage might lead to somewhat early elections and many in the ruling coalition do not seem to be ready to risk an election in conditions of double-digit inflation and face the ire of the electorate.

It is this utterly callous and anti-people attitude that best indicates the current degree of disconnect between the powers that be and the people and their plight. This disconnect has today become the hallmark of the UPA model of 'secular governance' and 'aam aadmi' (common person) rhetoric. Soaked neck-deep in the ideology of 'corporate industrialisation and development', the CPI (M) in West Bengal has also begun to revel in this disconnect. The panchayat results have merely provided some early electoral confirmation of the emerging popular mood in West Bengal. In a way the situation seems tailor-made for the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) and the National Democratic Alliance (NDA). True to the ideology and historical tradition of fascism, the BJP is evidently capable of exploiting any and every popular resentment for its own sectarian and retrograde agenda. Karnataka has once again confirmed this basic truth regarding the BJP.

What should be the Left and democratic response to this political challenge thrown up by the unfolding situation? More doses of 'secular partnership' with the Congress? Bihar and Karnataka have clearly revealed the basic fallacy in this approach. A decade ago elections had produced a

ruling arrangement in the shape of a United Front (UF) backed from outside both by the Congress and the Communist Party of India (Marxist) [CPI (M)]. On the face of it the UF had managed to keep the BJP out of power, but only for a few months. If today the UPA experiment seems headed in the same direction, it must compel Left and democratic forces to look beyond such suicidal tactical shortcuts. The way forward lies only through a bold, consistent and vigorous espousal of the cause of the people against the growing economic and national crisis home-delivered by the comprador Indian votaries of imperialist globalization.

P.S.

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