

No Radical Rupture

It's political dysfunction that the left is fighting, not price rise. A 12-hour *bharat bandh* on April 27 against price rise, called by the left opposition, including a section of non-official left was one more mass ritual that people are so familiar with in this part of the globe. The issue was national but the impact of work stoppage and disruption in transport for 12 hours was too feeble to be felt beyond some left-ruled states. After the *bandh* the official left—the non-official left doesn't matter in parliamentary game—alongwith the communal Bharatiya Janata Party and its NDA allies moved cut motions on the demands for grants of various ministries relating to the General Budget 2010-11, only to see their move defeated very badly because the Congress was shrewd enough to divide the opposition and neutralise the redoubtable Yadav Brigade. But the left enjoyed the moment as they sensed moral victory in defeat on the floor and congratulated themselves only to say goodbye to any further mass action on a burning issue—price rise.

In Indian economy oil is the holy cow and virtually all parties benefit from the hike in prices of petrol and diesel. While the sultans of Delhi are the major beneficiaries, local subedars in states get their share through cess mechanism. Marxists are opposing—and quite justifiably—the periodic hike in prices of petrol and diesel but they themselves refuse to abolish cess on petrol and diesel. It's a well-orchestrated drama and ordinary consumers, wage earners who face continual decline in real wage due to double-digit inflation, are confronted by the fact that they cannot see beyond the way things are now.

In the yester years anti-price rise movement served as a unique rallying point for mobilising broad masses for the left because life-span of any such exercise was somewhat longish. No more. They are not against the permanent necessity of existing conditions unless they face some electoral compulsions. If today they are making harmless noises about inflation and price rise, it is because they will have to face local and assembly polls in a very short time. As a ruler they are no less responsible for price rise in their own regional sphere of influence. Passing the buck cannot wash.

Surprisingly parliamentary naxalite groups and parties look reluctant to make price rise a popular issue. Maybe, they think in today's neo-liberal regime it is not possible to build up mass movement around price-rise, thereby virtually allowing the market forces to play their dirty tricks in manipulating the market to the disadvantage of the majority of people. Also, they are totally against harassing left-ruled states over price-rise issue because they still think the so-called left, rather the official left, is a lesser evil which it is not. This lesser-evil theory stands in the way of normal growth of naxalite forces in left-ruled states.

There is food inflation and the government in New Delhi is quite philosophical about it but there is no food movement. The hungry won't revolt on their own. The spread of hunger around the world is horrifying. In a situation of near famine

in some parts of the country to debate over right to food in seminar halls is ludicrous.

For one thing the number of people in the world who are hungry because of insufficient calorie intake rose from about 840 million in 2003 to more than a billion in 2009 as per latest observation made by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO). Another billion people may have enough calories but are malnourished and in chronic poor health due to micro-nutrient short falls. In other words the world's 6.8 billion people are malnourished and unable to secure sufficient healthy food to conduct normal activities. And most of these under-nourished live in India.

While hunger and malnutrition afflict the subalterns in general, they impact women most. More than 60 percent of the chronically hungry are women and the situation is desperate in India. Ironically, at the same time that women, particularly living below poverty level, are most vulnerable to hunger, they produce most of the food. Powerful women who duel over women's reservation in parliament have no time to think over how peasant women and adivasi women who are chronically malnourished, make essential contributions to feeding society. The concept of food sovereignty was first raised at the 1996 World Food Summit by La Via Campesina, the international movement that represents peasant family farm-based food production across the globe. At the third world food summit held in November 2009 in Rome, a parallel forum came into being at the initiative of some NGOs and civil society organisations. But political outfits on the left in India., irrespective of their varying degrees of leftist shade, do not see any potential in championing the cause of right to food for all, albeit 'food inflation' is now engulfing even the middle class.

Unable or unwilling to make concessions on price-rise and other important issues, the government is adopting an increasingly antagonistic posture toward the downtrodden the left used to call its own constituency. □□□