

Seeking Paths to Salvation

People these days do not pin too much hope on the oppositional model of protest because all opposition parties, left and right alike, are more interested in populism than real agitation. True, the Manmohan Singh government has been a disaster for the country but people, above all, are fed up with the hypocrisy of much of the established left and quasi-left, which are leaving them, at a time of great stress and strain, without a tolerable political and economic atmosphere while making pompous and hollow speeches to cover up their deceit. What the ruling dispensation of Congress-led United Progressive Alliance and the combination of left and right opposition agree on is the need to avoid a social upheaval by masses. So a bandh or two is not a bad idea. After all it won't really swing support to radical left or ultra left. The opposition parties do not oppose the prevailing market mechanism that generates crisis in business or even in mere trivial social interactions. That the 5 July 12-hour nationwide bandh called by the National Democratic Alliance of the saffron establishment and official left outfits demanding a rollback of the fuel price hike would pass off peacefully was a foregone conclusion. Everybody knows the opposition is selling fire without smoke.

On his way back from the G-20 summit in Toronto prime minister Manmohan Singh made it clear that they won't reduce fuel prices under any circumstances, bandh or no bandh. On June 25 his government decontrolled petrol prices and raised diesel prices by Rs 2 per litre in preparation for eventual decontrol, LPG prices were hiked by Rs 35 per cylinder while kerosene rates went up by Rs 3 per litre. Their action was in tune with the 'reforms package' they announced in their 1991 budget. They are moving step by step to dismantle whatever remains of government control over the economy. What the Congress party is about is now as clear as anything else. They have already dismantled civil liberties and human rights. They have given millions to the failed corporate tycoons while asking people to believe that it is Maoist violence which is to blame for the decline of their standard of living. They have the blood of millions on their hands while opposition parties have all along helping them to keep toilers weak and at the mercy of big corporations and the state.

If opposition parties including left parties are voicing their murmur against price hike, not the policy that lies at the root of price rise, it is because, they are themselves going to raise transport fares in the states where they are in power while blaming it on the centre for their helplessness and compulsion. The all important bandh was a kind of dress rehearsal for that eventuality, keeping people in good humour. It is purely a show business for those who think parliamentary culture in India has come of age as opposition is doing something.

The state governments irrespective of the party flags that run them, have refused to oblige the centre by withdrawing their cess on petroleum and diesel. Liquid gold is the major source for mopping revenue for all—the centre and states—to have a robust exchequer. After all this parliamentary game of hide and seek is all about looting the exchequer.

Strangely enough, ex-Lohia-ites, most of them are now part of UPA, didn't oppose the centre's decision to de-control oil prices. They are satisfied with caste-census. But their very caste constituencies are no less affected by the continuing price rise and double digit inflation which will get a further boost after the recent hike. Their campaign has less to do with petrol and diesel than with trying to save the caste-based electoral chances. In the final analysis the corporates rule and all of them dance to the tune of corporate-scripted market mechanism.

For one thing the Singhs are not afraid of double digit inflation or food inflation. They have been asking people to tighten their belts for long for the sake of "much needed reforms". And the opposition too has been toeing the idea without doing anything to reverse the government plan that solely relies on iron heels. Their engine of growth to satisfy a handful of corporate bosses demands more fuel and more money to buy more fuel from abroad. As the peak oil syndrome is sending wrong signals to bulk consumers who primarily depend on imports, the Singhs are now pushing nuclear power as a panacea to maintain a 'reasonable' growth rate. After America it is now the turn of Canada to applaud India's ambitious nuclear energy programme as it will open an expanding multi-billion dollar nuclear industry, otherwise ailing. On this issue too, the opposition has virtually no role to play because they are equally enthusiastic about nuclear power, albeit nuclear power is neither green nor clear. Nor is it cheap. After the bandh it will be business as usual because nobody will take trouble to fight the omnipotent market. The people of this helpless country are nothing if not magnanimous in defeat!