

## QUESTIONS TO DECIDE OUR VOTE

**Suchetha Pai Javali**

As I sit down to write this article, several things cross my mind. Do I write about yesterday's lathi charge and firing on peasants agitating against the acquisition of 1000 acres of their agricultural land for an airport in Sirivara near Bellary? Do I take up the issue of more than 40,000 contract workers who have been thrown out of jobs from a nearby Steel Plant? Do I speak of those who are now on the streets because the mining business is down after the economic recession set in? Or of the condition of our roads (rather potholes and death chambers), the lack of civic amenities, the dearth of even minimal health services in the rural areas, the pig-infested city, the fear of more children dying of dengue? Or of the promise of free power for pumpsets and the reality of dark hot summer days, the firing on peasants who only wanted fertilisers, the students demanding a reduction in the bus-pass fare hike, the slumdwellers asking for potable drinking water, toilets and drainage facilities? Or should I deal with 'conversions', the issue of land in Amarnath for a temple, or the need to preserve "Indian (read Hindu) culture"?

### Poverty, Wealth and Uncertainty

My grassroots experience in Bellary district of Karnataka shows that *several issues call for attention in the forthcoming elections. And such issues exist almost everywhere!* In the last Assembly elections, people's illiteracy, poverty and low level of consciousness made them sell their votes for Rs 5,000 or less. In addition, they got colour TVs, electronic gadgets, mobile phones, bikes, etc. 'Organisers' even got expensive cars for having brought in 'support'.

The 2009 national elections are now approaching. There are daily reports of possible political alliances, lists of candidates are being

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prepared, and budgets are made with great care. Meanwhile, attacks by self-proclaimed 'protectors' of Hindu culture are going on, someone is caught in corruption, and our state government is engaged in 'educating' students to 'fight terror', which it equates with Pakistan and the Muslims! We are beginning to realise that *the fabric of democracy is being torn asunder by the growing intolerance.*

Since the last elections five years ago and the Sensex crash over 'who would be PM', we had Manmohan Singh to lead the country into further 'progress', supported by his able 'Left' allies and a host of others. The media has of course sensationalised everything from Arushi's murder to a little boy trapped inside a well. We had Singur and Nandigram, and wondered if Obama winning the US elections would do us good and whether the Nuke deal would benefit our farmers. Every bit of 'news' occupied us for a few days until the next sensation happened. Now our 'experts' will begin calculating who will win the forthcoming elections, what caste and communal factors will play a role, how popular a particular politician is, etc. Few issues will surface in election manifestos and every party will promise 'good governance' and 'development' in different names. As usual, terror attacks will strangely occur when there are elections around the corner, and the voice of true people's representatives will likely be drowned in the din of drum-beating and media-capturing by the bigger parties.

### The Class Character of Political Parties

*The most important question to understand in politics is the class character of parties. This determines whose interests the party or coalition in power serves.* According to the Marxist understanding, class is an instrument of struggle and the state is an instrument of coercion (a word that will make a few feel uncomfortable). Our country has the second highest number of dollar billionaires in the world, while millions starve to death. This inequitable distribution of wealth is enough to show that we live in a capitalist society where the profit motive guides production. This benefits a few individuals who go on amassing wealth, but it brings misery to the masses.

I often ask people: "*Who funds the political parties? Who gives them money to splurge during elections?*" **The answer to this**

**question explains the decisions and policies of political parties.** Will the representatives who are financed and elected with the money of businessmen, media conglomerates and monopolists indeed serve the people's interests rather than those of their moneyed bosses? Certainly not! The legacy of the Congress goes back to the period when Tata funded it. Many other business houses also support this party. And the BJP, the JD(S) and most other parties are similarly financed.

In more than 60 years of independence, our monopoly houses grew enough to spread all over the world and some of them even became giant players, buying up large companies and dictating terms to smaller countries. Meanwhile, our farmers were committing suicide, our women screaming for security, our unemployed youth milling the streets, and our senior citizens becoming anxious about the interest rates and their pensions. While the government is trying to convince us that our country is progressing and 'shining', innumerable families are being broken by poverty, unemployment and migration, and our farmers are being lured with the promise of jobs in industry as the monster of SEZs is grabbing their land and evicting them.

**So, whose interests do the political parties serve?** In spite of their claims to 'defend' and 'serve' the people, *the Congress, the BJP, the JD(S), the BSP and all such parties invariably serve the interests of capital and continue the policies of globalisation, liberalisation and privatisation.*

### The Real Issues

Since the last two parliamentary elections, our middle class experienced a period of boom and prosperity. *The current financial and economic crisis is however shattering its dreams.* Though the Government is trying to convince us that India's economy is doing quite well, our middle class is feeling the 'hurt', for it is losing its lifestyle. Quite a few people are fast sliding into a lower rung, and others have no more rungs and face an abyss. The government is busy promising our Tatas and Jindals and Mallays that they will be taken care of, so that we do not have a crisis as in America. Yet, most people are unable to make sense of the Sensex whose rise had given wings to their dreams of big and small cars, shopping complexes,

multiplexes, metros, and flyovers. They become worried about the future.

People suddenly feel concerned about the farmers losing their land and livelihood. They are mentally happy and economically disappointed that Obama won, and **they want to know the causes of this 'economic crisis'**. *Will it get worse, and when will it pass off and bring back our jobs and our lifestyle? These are the questions that haunt people.*

In my activities in Bellary and elsewhere, I realised that *nobody has been spared the effects of the big recession*, and none knows or can imagine what the big depression would be like. But our mines are closing down, and the garment industry as well; our brothers from far away Jharkhand, Orissa, Bengal, Bihar, Rajasthan, UP and even Nepal, who filled the streets of Torangal (where Jindal's Steel Plant is), are flooding the trains with a one-way ticket back home because Jindal has kindly given them a long holiday; the contractors' bills are not being cleared and the catering industry finds itself without work; and housewives are worried as prices rise beyond imagination.

Tourist hotels are on their way to extinction, cab drivers worry about their next instalment for the cab, automobiles are piling up in showrooms and our ancillaries are closing down. Our little boys and girls in government schools are being told by their parents that literacy is not as important as the next meal. Construction workers (who often are evicted or landlosing farmers or farm labourers) are anxiously waiting for the next call from the contractor who is more worried about the payment of his earlier dues. Some small-scale industrialists have committed suicide and their Association has threatened that they may follow the farmers by resorting to this extreme step; even the government employees are beginning to wonder whether they will get their salaries regularly. *The recession is in fact affecting all sections of the toiling people.*

**No bourgeois party is discussing these issues.** They are rather trying to please the industry barons with various concessions and supportive schemes. Bank interest and repo rates are being pulled up and down and the Central government is telling us not to panic, while the state governments are blaming the Centre for their difficulties... **Will such problems be really solved with another party coming to power?!**

## Further Questions

Even if there were no such acute economic crisis, we would still have several questions. The **National Knowledge Commission** has virtually laid down the foundation for all-out privatisation. Chaired by Sam Pitroda, this Committee of ‘committed’ (read ‘government paid’) educationists tells us in subtle ways that we need two types of schools and universities – for those who can pay and those who cannot. It says that resource mobilisation is an important task for teachers (sorry, ‘facilitators’). It highlights the urgent need for ‘world-class universities’ (read ‘private funded’). *Critics have begun to term it the ‘No Knowledge Commission’, for its out and out anti-people character.*

The **National Policy for Farmers** follows a similar pattern with a different agenda. It plans to go for larger farms, provide more irrigation facilities, centralise the process of acquiring seeds, fertilisers, pesticides, etc. But the real agenda is to buy up large tracts of land from peasants who hold one or two acres, slowly and gradually hand over everything to multinationals, and thus contribute a large number of martyrs for *the cause of agricultural monopolisation.*

The **SEZ Act** tells us that an industry (or person) can establish its own kingdom without any laws. For rendering the service of industrialisation and employment, the industry receives huge concessions and is permitted to build townships and related structures (read ‘game resorts’, ‘race courses’, etc.). It is not bound by the Industrial Disputes Act and is exempt from tax for a long period. The revenue losses to the government will thus be a whopping Rs 1,75,000 crore, which the people will have to make up by ‘tightening their belts’ or rather the noose around their necks.

It is obvious that *the losers are the farming community* (strangely, almost all SEZs are on fertile land, most of them close to cities, harbours, and highways). Landlosers will be provided employment – as cooks, sentries, attenders, dhobis and cleaners, that is. And they will be paid a fair compensation for the land, which they will never be able to buy again because its value will have multiplied! The issue has been discussed threadbare in the aftermath of Nandigram and the answer is crystal clear: *this is a policy meant to fill the coffers of the super-rich and build their castles over the dead bodies of the poor farmers. Islands of plenty in an ocean of poverty.*

The amendments to the APMC Act and other Acts related to VAT, Retail trade, etc. are ample proof that *the present ruling UPA coalition has not brought anything good for the toiling millions. The UPA has served the interests of capital all through.* That it introduced and is still pursuing the policy of globalisation is sufficient to show its class character. It should moreover be emphasised that *the foundation for most of the above policies had been laid by the BJP-led NDA a few years ago and that the BJP did not oppose any of them either.* In fact, most of these policies were passed without much notice or discussion while the BJP was otherwise busy.

## Bloody Hues of Saffron

**The BJP and its various avatars like the Bajrang Dal, VHP, MNS and Sri Rama Sene are all spreading their poisonous fangs.** We have witnessed the fascistic attacks on minorities in Gujarat and the experiment of genocide there. The man who engineered and masterminded the operations is now being projected as one of the key national leaders or perhaps a Prime Ministerial candidate. *As the hands of fanatics drip with blood, the cry of our women rents the skies.* These preservers of culture have on them the curse of thousands of women who were molested, attacked, raped or killed in Gujarat, Orissa, Karnataka, and elsewhere. Their hate campaign springing from intolerance shows their fascist character. *Attacks on imagined conversions, destruction and vandalisation of churches, burning of huts and houses, bestial atrocities and gang raping of women, attacking women in pubs and other public places – these have been their regular activities.* These self-proclaimed preservers of culture have no qualms either in buying the votes of poor Muslims and Christians through overt or covert means. None of this seems to smear their self-righteousness and purity.

The atrocities in Kandhamal, Mangalore, Mumbai and UP (during the VHP Bundh) are beamed on media, *showing the frenzied dancing and celebration of these fanatics even as they beat people or burnt or destroy their property to keep their culture pure.* It is likely that our media and the intelligentsia will focus more attention on such events in the future. *We must however bear in mind that the BJP too is a party of the capitalist class, but a fascist party glorifying Hindutva and denying the fact of pluralism*

in India. The aim of cleansing the nation of all minorities is part of their agenda to bring about the Hindu rashtra. The building of the Ram Temple at Ayodhya thus seems a major slogan for the forthcoming elections. The pitching for Hindu votes and the terrorisation of the minorities are additions to its pro-capitalist character. *The BJP should therefore be condemned and rejected not only for its communalism and fascism, but especially for its capitalist character.*

*In fact, the BJP which allowed the attacks on pubs did not hesitate to issue licenses to 1,500 pubs and bars. It thus made it easy to manufacture and sell liquor. It also formulated a Wine Policy to encourage the sale of wine even in General Provision stores. While patronising the Rama Sena, the BJP is also very generous to the liquor lobby, which has an important say in Karnataka politics. The mining lobby has of course the power to topple a government or to propel a party to power. The BJP is also serving the interests of this lobby.*

*Would the BJP satisfactorily tackle the issues of inflation, economic poverty and inequalities, unemployment and globalisation, caste and untouchability? Would it promote the empowerment of women? When it comes to protecting women, the BJP gets even more negative marks. One of its Chief Ministers openly admitted that since its rise to power, atrocities on women had shot up in his State!*

### **The Left Parties**

*The Left parties speak against globalisation, but in the states where they govern, they seem to have no qualms in implementing its policies. The manner in which the Nandigram issue was handled and the open certificate given by Tata to Buddhadev raise questions about their class character. They do speak of the working masses but are they really serving their interests? What then was their compulsion to kill and rape those who were fighting to keep their land? Why did they permit an SEZ on fertile land?*

Many such questions have to be addressed. **What policies did the Left parties introduce in the states they govern? Have their policies benefited the people?** Did they result in lower prices,

better amenities, more job opportunities, better health care and education, greater protection for women, more subsidies for the poor, a fair distribution of rations? What have been the stands of Left parties on various issues, for instance on the Bills mentioned above? **Whose interests do they truly uphold?**

### **Deciding Our Vote**

Due to space constraints, we cannot discuss here the other parties. We must therefore be satisfied by asking some basic questions to decide our choice of rulers.

**Who will truly uphold the people's cause in the Parliament? Who will expose the anti-people character of various policies? Which parties will really work for the people? What are the class interests of various parties, and their aims and policies? What has been the record of various parties in building people's movements and uniting people on common demands? Who will ultimately benefit from their coming into power?**

*Which party/coalition will lead our country to increase both its minority of millionaires and the majority of slumdogs? Which one will usher in a just society where there can be neither? **Let our answers decide our vote!***