

Topic of the week for discussion: 8th to 14th August 2013

Topic: Utopian Politics: Rs. 5 a Meal



Topic Introduction

Sayajirao Gaekwad, the ruler of the erstwhile State of Baroda had a self-imposed rule: visit the local markets from where his subjects bought their groceries, once a week. The logic was, that the marketplace – how much people bought for what price – provided a true indicator of the status of his people for he could not possibly visit households. Simultaneously, this wise, astute ruler, who also financed BR Ambedkar's studies overseas, had another routine: keep a sharp eye on the kitchen budget; costing its menu with the belief that a reasonably managed kitchen was a daily pilot for a well-managed State. In short, he was fine-tuned to the world around him. The same cannot be said of the swaggering politicians who rule us today. They are so out of touch with the realities of their country, that they do not even know how much it costs the poor to put food on their plates. If they did manage, it was not even adequate to ensure the calorific content, leave alone nutrition.

On Wednesday, Congress spokesman Raj Babbar said one can have a full meal for Rs 12 in Mumbai. On Thursday, Congress Rajya Sabha MP Rasheed Masood went a step further, claiming, "You can eat well for Rs 5 in the Jama Masjid area of Delhi". The MP still seems to be living in a bygone era. Maybe he should visit the area again. In the late 1980s, one could have still expected to have a meal for Rs 5 when the roti used to cost less than a rupee and gravy dishes could be had for Rs 2. The minimum price of a roti now is Rs 3 even at the most basic of food outlets. A gravy dish costs a minimum of Rs 20. The only affordable meal (if it can be termed as such) is a small portion of rice and modest sprinkling of daal (pulses), but that too costs about Rs 15. Either our politicians are not in touch with reality or food prices have come down drastically for a privileged few in the country. Almost turning out to be a competition among Congress leaders to quote the minimum possible rate in which one can have a sumptuous meal, UPA ally Farooq Abdullah made an even more frivolous remark, saying Re1 was enough to survive for a day.

If only Mr. Babbar were to disclose this caterer's identity, who then can scale up his output, spread his activity across the country – the government with its Food Security Law (the Bill is law, by the ordinance) can then save on huge subsidy bills. It needn't even tweak efficiency into the scandalous public distribution system. That same Rs 5, if you recall, was what Congress' spiel-master, Manish Tewari, said was the market discovered price of Narendra Modi, to attend whose rally in Hyderabad people have to pay at the gate. The logic of Rs 5 being insultingly low for a politician, somehow, suddenly, is absurdly enough for a meal. And someone else says a fifth of that was enough.

Restaurant owners in Delhi laughed at Masood's assertion that one could eat well for Rs5.

Mohammad Salman, owner of Mehboob and Zubairi hotels in Nizamuddin Basti, said devotees who wish to feed beggars have to pay Rs20-25 for two rotis and curry. A 'decent' meal" consisting of a non-vegetarian gravy and two rotis" at the cheapest eatery will cost not less than Rs 20-25. Even a small pouch of water costs Rs 2. If you plan to sip tea at a stall, it will cost at least Rs 7. Don't have money for food and want to make do with juice? A glass of juice will cost no less than Rs 10. The only hope for a person who has to live on Rs 5 per meal is the alms being distributed on account of the holy month of Ramzaan. As part of charity during this period, many people have been buying meals costing Rs 20-25 to be distributed free of cost to the poor. And here's something for Masood to chew on. A beggar standing outside the eatery was given a Rs 5 by a munificent. But she refused to accept it, saying it would not help her get any food. "I will not get anything for this. If you really want to help me, you have to give me at least Rs 20 so that I can buy something to eat," she said. The mystery is solved at the Parliament House canteen, which only Mr Masood and his fellow-MPs and some other people can access. Perhaps the only place in the capital where a plate of Idli and sambhar costs Rs. 4 and a masala dosa Rs. 6.

Mr Masood, and before him fellow-Congressman Raj Babbar, were defending the Planning Commission's benchmark for defining poverty. The panel's latest report says that anyone with access to Rs. 33 in India's cities and Rs. 27 in villages, is not poor. And by that controversial definition, poverty has shrunk in the country in the last seven years of UPA rule.

Ever since the Planning Commission declared that poverty in the country has fallen to 22 per cent in 2011-12 from 37 per cent in 2004-05, Congress leaders have been lauding the party for its achievements. The government, however, is being asked why is the Food Security Bill touted as a game-changer for 67 per cent people of the country if poverty levels have gone down.

The BJP has slammed the Congress for what it calls its "cheap joke on the poor." Congress communication department in charge Ajay Maken at the same time, attacked BJP for criticizing the Rs 33.30 Poverty Line figures of the Planning Commission, saying the opposition party should explain why it was Rs 16.73 in 59th NSSO survey of 2003 and accepted by BJP/NDA Govt?.

Slamming the government's poverty fixation criteria as a "cruel joke" on the poor, Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar today said poverty should not be measured in terms of calories and money but on the basis of right to live with dignity.

The current anger is more about inflation than about poverty — how dare anyone suggest that it is possible to get by on what seems to be an absurdly low number by the yardsticks that we employ. Why, even a Diet Coke costs more than Rs 12, as someone said on Twitter. The Rs 12 anger is really about arguing that the middle class is getting poorer rather than an empathy for those below the poverty line, however it is defined. The empathy is not with the poor but with what is seen to be the shared burden of poverty. We are all feeling poorer, and here we have politicians smugly telling us otherwise. The implicit argument being made by those protesting is not really against poverty but for an inflation-adjusted definition of poverty.

It might be unfair to demand from political leaders or governments that they eliminate poverty overnight. But surely demanding some sensitivity towards the plight of the poor is not too much to ask. To suggest that one can have a proper meal in Delhi for Rs 5 is really to make a mockery of poverty and the poor. It reflects either a complete lack of connect with reality or insensitivity or both.

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