

COMMENT

Rotten to the Core

OCCASIONALLY THE COURT may give some pro-people verdicts, but the trouble is that those who are supposed to implement them find them embarrassing to their vested interests and use all sorts of tricks to sabotage them. The recent judgment of the Supreme Court directing the Government of India to distribute the huge stock of food grains, stored in government warehouses and waiting to be rendered unfit for human consumption, free of cost to the poor is one such instance. Of course, the government has its own defense mechanism, and Mr Somnath Chatterjee, the veteran lawyer and former speaker, has raised questions about the constitutional propriety of the judgment, arguing that devising measures for food security should best be left to the government. Persons like Somnath Chatterjee may think that feeding the poor is less important than upholding the sanctity of the constitution. But their argument is not unassailable. If the right to life is a fundamental right, then shouldn't the right to food, without which a person cannot live, be a fundamental right? Of course the subterfuge and casuistry about constitutional propriety, as labled by the opponents of the verdict, have their own utility.

The Government of India is now blaming state governments for not lifting their quotas of food grain meant for sale to the people through the public distribution system. If the charge is true, why not give them this food grain free of cost, especially when the huge stock is rotting?

Besides the alleged lack of constitutional propriety, they wish to peddle the notion that free distribution of food grain is likely to depress the price of food grain and weaken the incentive for production. They gleefully forget that those who are to receive this food grain do not have even the minimum power to participate in the market process. If free distribution relieves them of the anxiety about not being able to procure enough cereals, they can spend something on vegetables, clothes, medicine etc, boosting the demand for these basic necessities. There is another significant point that must be taken into account. The Food Corporation of India has purchased the food grain stored in the warehouses at remunerative prices. So long as the farmers continue to receive such prices, talks of incentive or alleged lack of it are sheer bullshit. Of course there are some big hoarders always looking for the opportunity to create artificial scarcity and fill their coffers. Implementation of the Supreme Court verdict may harm their vested interests. Is this the real reason for the official reluctance to obey the court order?

Manmohan Singh and his whiz-kid mentors think that the forces of the market, the panacea of all diseases, will be weakened if the teeming millions are provided with food by the government. They, however, also think that if government employs its armed strength to help the corporate in acquiring land, water and other resources, this will not weaken the market, but rather strengthen it, although distribution of surplus food grain to the most marginalized section of the people will be disastrous for the operation of the market.

One may well go one step forward and say that the economic philosophy underlying the opinions of economist mentors and the economist Prime Minister himself, betray an

ignorance of the long tradition of economic thought. Manmohan Singh, along with his mentors and advocates are most probably feeling safe in the belief—one may well call it an illusion—that the famished Indians do not have the capacity to rise in revolt.