

## Price of rice, price of power

Most governments that stressed welfarist measures gained in last month's elections. Food prices and cheap rice are crucial, though not the sole issues, notes P Sainath.

Now that we have a Cabinet whose assets total close to Rs.5 billion on its own declaration, with Ministers worth over Rs.75 million each on average, it will be worth watching how it rises to the challenge of identifying with the poor and the hungry. That Rs.5 billion figure, painstakingly compiled by the National Election Watch, a coalition of over 1200 civil society organisations working across India, covers 64 of the 79 Ministers. The other 15 are Rajya Sabha members whose updated assets are yet to be computed.

True, these figures are skewed by the fact that the top five Ministers alone are worth Rs. 2 billion. However, as the NEW points out, the rest are not destitute. In all, 47 of the 64 are crorepatists. And the remaining 15 won't harm the score too much when their totals come in.

Together, they will preside over the destiny of, amongst others, 836 million Indians who "get by with less than Rs.20 a day" (National Commission for Enterprises in the Unorganised Sector report, August 2007). This challenge will unfold in a Lok Sabha where the average worth of an MP is Rs.51 million. Again, this average too, is skewed by a chunk of 60-70 MPs of the 543 whose asset worth is relatively very low. On the other hand, many have notched up large gains in wealth during their first term as MPs.

In a complex and layered verdict driven by many factors, one seems clear: most governments that stressed welfarist measures - particularly cheap rice and employment - gained in last month's election results. This was regardless of which party was leading them - the Congress, the BJP, the BJD, the DMK or any other. Some of these measures might not have led to large numbers of people going out to vote for those governments. But they at least lowered hostility levels amongst the voters in a hungry nation. As Madhura Swaminathan points out, the FAO data confirm that "no country comes close to India in terms of the absolute number of people living in chronic hunger."

The hungry have had it pretty bad. The rise in food prices was extremely steep over the last five years, one of our more adverse periods in decades. Between just 2004 and 2008, the price of rice rose by over 45 per cent and of wheat by more than 60 per cent. Atta, edible oils, dals, milk and even salt saw rises of between 30 and 40 per cent. Lower or near-zero inflation has seen no drop in food prices. That the media never saw hunger and cheap food as a major poll factor says more about them than the issue.

The DMK's colour television set giveaway - the focus of much derisory media attention - was never a fraction as important as its provision of 20 kg of rice per family at Rs.1 a kg since September 2008. That too, for anyone with a ration card, without dividing people into the APL or BPL groups. Tamilnadu had already been providing rice at Rs.2 a kg for some years. It also took the NREGA seriously. The State government gained on both counts.

In Andhra Pradesh, like in Tamilnadu, the Congress government of Y S Rajasekhara Reddy was helped by the presence of a third party - Chiranjeevi's Praja Rajyam - which drew a lot of anti-Congress votes, crippling the rival Telugu Desam Party. But YSR's was also a government which in its first year restored lakhs of cancelled BPL cards and issued lakhs of new ones. (*The Hindu*, Sept. 29, 2005) In nine years, Chandrababu Naidu's government issued no BPL card till the period just before the elections. That in a State where hunger and food have been huge issues even in urban areas.

Andhra Pradesh was where rice at Rs.2 a kg began with Naidu's father-in-law, then Chief Minister N.T. Rama Rao. NTR's charisma was never in question - but rice at Rs.2 a kg helped, more than any other factor, to convert it into votes. Chief Minister Rajasekhara Reddy in fact stole the TDP's clothes when in April 2008 he brought back the Rs.2 a kg rice scheme - a year before the national polls. This was at 4 kg per person (or 20 kg per family of five). An earlier generation of Congress leaders had trashed NTR's pet project as a "costly gimmick." But Dr. Reddy took a more sensible line and gained from it.

During Mr. Naidu's years in power, so lavishly praised in the media for his reforms, the public was repeatedly hit by massive hikes in power charges, water rates, food prices and other costs. He has not managed to live down his record or regain credibility in 2009.

His adversary ran a decent NREGA programme. In the backward Mahbubnagar district, distress migrations fell as many found work under the NREGA. This at a time when food prices were biting. So much so that people in their 70s turned up at NREG sites for work - their Rs.200-a-month pensions blown away by the rise in food prices. Even on that front, though, the Andhra Pradesh government earned some credit. When it assumed power, there were 1.8 million people in the State getting old-age, widow and disability pensions - a paltry Rs.75 each. This was raised to Rs.500 for disabled people and Rs.200 for the rest. Hardly enough - but a lot more than before. And the number of people getting these pensions rose four-fold to 7.2 million. The State also has one of the country's better pension schemes for women.



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In Orissa, Naveen Patnaik played his cards most effectively, gutting the BJP and corraling the Congress. But he also gained hugely from giving people cheap rice. In the burning hunger zones of Kalahandi-Bolangir-Koraput, 25 kg of rice had been offered to all families at Rs.2 a kg since mid-2008. In the rest of the State, this was restricted to BPL families. The government also gave out 10 kg of free rice to the poorest families in the KBK districts. This had a major impact in curbing starvation deaths. Mr. Patnaik also increased the numbers of those coming under pension schemes - and housing projects for the poor - quite significantly. (At the same time, he implemented the Sixth Pay Commission recommendations before the polls, sewing up the middle classes as well).

Sure, these were not the only issues on which people voted, but they played a big role (In the case of YSR and Mr. Patnaik, there was another factor that helped this along. The positive measures in both States were present and visible. The negatives - and they are explosive, like massive human displacement, SEZs, dangerous mining projects - are in the pipeline. Disasters waiting to happen but which will take two or three years to do so. Unless, of course, those policies change.)

In Chhattisgarh, however repugnant the ways of that government in many spheres, Chief Minister Raman Singh took a personal interest in declaring 35 kg per family at Rs.3 a kg. His government then unilaterally "increased" the number of people below the poverty line to almost 15 million - in a population of 20.8 million (2001 census). That is, close to 70 per cent of the population was "declared" BPL. This was done several months before the 2008 Assembly elections. It helped the government in both the State and national polls.

The Left Front in West Bengal failed on both fronts. The State saw rioting at ration shops last year as the Centre cut allocations of grain sharply. Yet West Bengal, which tops the States in rice production, moved towards provision of cheaper rice only early this year. Too reluctantly and too late. Its performance in the NREGS was also very poor. Hunger was a factor in the rout of the Left Front.

So what should those in power read into the poll results? That they have a mandate for more liberalisation, privatisation, high prices and other such reforms? Or that the price of rice could be the price of power? That jobs and security are vital? Food prices and cheap rice are crucial, though not the sole issues. Governments cannot bank on such moves already made to bring them perpetual gains. But the whole process is a step ahead and has raised the bar on public expectations. Sharp reversals could prove suicidal.

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