

From Promises to Performance: Political Manifestos and Budget 2004-05

Author(s): Dunu Roy

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ERs of the PRIs for conducting panchayat affairs and attending meetings, etc. Otherwise, their income-earning employment, their interest in panchayat work and their ability to perform duties, etc, will be adversely affected. In addition, preference may be given to dalit women ERs for becoming the members of SHGs being formed under different rural development programmes implemented by the governments. These would go a long way not only in their economic betterment but also in their political empowerment and social emancipation.

Sensitisation and re-orientation of social and administrative system: There is need for changing the outlook of the higher castes and concerned officials towards the dalit elected representatives of the panchayats through sensitisation so that these people encourage and help them in the performance of their duties and responsibilities.

Promotion of good practices: In order to promote good practices for proper implementation of the PRIs, dalit women sarpanches who excelled in their work may be awarded by organising special functions at district and higher levels. This will not only bring self-confidence among these women but also have a demonstration effect on the society at large.

It may also be added here that for effective implementation of the support system for the de facto political empowerment of dalit women ERs as suggested above, besides the initiatives and intervention of the governments and constitutional bodies such as the NCW and the National Commission for Scheduled Castes, pro-active involvement and participation of civil society organisations, non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations and research and training institutions, particularly women-oriented ones, are imperative and must, therefore, be encouraged.

To sum up the outcome of the workshop, caste prejudices emerged as a major stumbling block in the way of the functioning of dalit women representatives of panchayats. This, in fact, is a result of the unwillingness the dominated castes hold for having themselves become ineligible to share the powers and control they have long been used to in the PRIs, due to the new constitutional provisions for the dalits. Due to the prevailing stranglehold of the caste structure in rural society in India, neither the respect for the office of ERs nor the simple social values of giving equal regard to fellow human-beings, impel fellow villagers and the fellow elected representatives to treat dalit women ERs as equal during the course of their functioning

under the PRS. This has resulted into paradoxical situation, where on the one hand the Panchayati Raj Act provides de jure powers to the office of the sarpanches and on the other, de facto, they remain bereft of these powers. The decentralised bureaucracy, which is expected to work under the guidance and supervision of the ERs of the panchayats, is either generally away from the scene or succumbs to the pressure of the village politics and power game.

But all has not been lost and as they say, every cloud has a silver lining. The deliberations during the workshop did indeed reveal that PRS has been instrumental to a significant extent in igniting the process of releasing the depressed, oppressed and suppressed energy of the dalit women who have got the opportunity to come forward as ERs. It was found that wherever the dalit

ERs were oppressed and obstructed by the dominant castes, they came out openly to resist, and to struggle against the oppressors. Importantly, it was also found that whenever the women panchayat leaders were literate, they were more assertive than the others. A promising and positive conclusion gathered from this workshop was that dalit women ERs especially the educated ones among them, had become quite visible, assertive and vocal whenever the circumstances allowed. It may be treated as a beginning of the end of the invisibility of dalit women sarpanches in local governance. This process of their becoming visible, assertive and empowered can be hastened by enlarging the scope of their functions and building their capabilities to function effectively through appropriate training and exposure opportunities. **EPW**

From Promises to Performance

Political Manifestos and Budget 2004-05

The Common Minimum Programme is clearly a document that reconciles contradictory pressures and demands while providing a 'human face' to governance. But the budget indicates that much of this may be a mask that hides the real intentions of proceeding further with cutting back on state investment in essential areas.

DUNU ROY

Every political party that comes into power in India begins by promising to do certain activities to improve the state of the nation, if it comes to power. This is its manifesto. When, and if, it actually comes into power, it has to deliver on those promises by putting public money where its mouth is. This is the budget. In recent times, this exercise has become more complicated by the fact that it is an alliances of parties that is coming into power, since no single party can make it on its own. Hence, in between the manifesto and the budget, the alliance of parties has to hammer out a common minimum programme (CMP) – which may not totally conform to the manifesto of any of the parties constituting the alliance.

In this paper, I look at the manifestos of the parties that later formed the UPA government, as issued by them before the elections of May 2004. This is an attempt to compare them to understand what may

or may not have appealed to the electorate. Then the CMP is analysed to assess whether the separate manifestos of these parties were clubbed together to make the CMP, or were there elements that had to be borrowed from the manifestos of the supporting parties. Finally, the recent budget is dissected to see which of the promises are actually supported by specific financial allocations. It should, however, be noted that the budget merely indicates broad policies. The real intentions of the ruling alliance will be known only when the Planning Commission makes the detailed sub-sectoral allocations.

Moreover, in this paper I shall try and focus on what may be the perspective of those who actually labour for a living. The broad areas covered would be the generation and protection of employment, both in the unorganised as well as organised sectors; the promises made regarding agriculture, including farm labour; and the views on how to strengthen the 'weaker' sections, including women, children, dalits,

tribals, and other 'minorities'. Since there appears to be a political consensus that what may be required is "liberalisation with a human face", some attention would also be paid to some of the other policies that impact on the working poor.

Promises

The Indian National Congress (INC), which now heads the UPA government, and the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) were apparently much more articulate, as compared to the NDA, about the concerns of the poor and the weak. Thus the INC, in its manifesto, committed itself to expand employment in the organised sector and to promote employment-intensive growth, even while calling for vastly expanded credit for self-employment in services. It even promised an employment guarantee for 100 days on asset-creating public works. The DMK took a similar stand with respect to creating jobs in the government sector and self-employment schemes, with particular emphasis on the educated unemployed, with a proposed million women village workers along with another million road workers. Furthermore, it promised national measures for labour welfare in line with the schemes it had implemented in Tamil Nadu.

The INC spelt out an 'Agriculture First' strategy, along with cooperative rural credit, easing the debt burden, increasing the coverage of small and marginal farmers, agro-processing and other agriculture-related activities, fair prices, minimum wages, and land to the landless. National rainwater harvesting and development of irrigation were prioritised, while all funds for poverty alleviation and rural development were to be credited directly to panchayat bodies. An agricultural stabilisation fund was proposed to increase the profitability of agriculture in tandem with a long-term export policy for agricultural products, so that the sector could contribute significantly to an anticipated 10 per cent rate of growth in the economy. The DMK too called for a minimum support price, relaxation of regulations in power distribution, and the commercial production and conservation of processed food. In addition, it sought to protect farmers from floods and droughts, and from the impact of WTO conditionalities.

The INC appeared to agree with the BJP that Indian industry would be encouraged to enhance its global presence, with incentives for boosting private investment. It concurred in the applications of IT, and the modernisation of household and artisanal industry. But it asserted that the public sector would

be strengthened in key sectors while private-public energies would be fostered, particularly for strengthening infrastructure. At the same time, support would be provided to unorganised enterprises and laws would be enacted to protect labour and safety. The administration would be revamped to make it more performance-oriented and accountable. As a regional party, the DMK went a step further to outline sectoral steps for weavers' welfare through removal of excise duty on powerlooms and restricting export of cotton yarn; and for fishermen's welfare with a national savings scheme, improvement of ports, and protection from harassment. It also suggested that the \$100 billion foreign exchange reserve could be used to improve infrastructure.

Apart from reservations in legislatures, the INC suggested that 30 per cent of all local government funds would be for the development of women and children. It shared the Telugu Desam Party's vision of village women associations, who would assume responsibility for drinking water, sanitation, primary education and health, nutrition, biogas, and farm forestry. This was to be accompanied by a major expansion of micro-finance based on self-help groups. The INC manifesto further promised reservations for backward sections among minorities, a reasonable share of jobs in the private sector for SC/ST, along with land redistribution and new strategies for sustainable livelihoods. The DMK, on the other hand, opposed economic criteria for reservations while endorsing the idea of equal opportunities in education and employment. Thus, these parties seem to have successfully appealed to the interests of large sections of the unemployed, the workers and the peasants, and the weaker sections.

'Alternative' Promises

The manifestos of the Communist Party of India (CPI) and the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPM) both spoke of an alternative path of development and carrying out a struggle for alternative policies, although it was left to the electorate to interpret what these alternatives were. Making clear where their constituency lay, the left parties alleged that neither of the alliances, led respectively by the BJP or the INC, had the perspective or ability to better the lot of the mass of the Indian people. In the realm of employment, both called for establishing the right to work as a fundamental right, and for investing in public works that would create fresh employment as well as provide food-for-work. While the CPM added that the freeze on recruitment to government jobs should

be scrapped, both parties seemed to realise that the state could not provide enough direct employment, and so joined the other parties in pledging to ensure adequate credit for self-employment schemes.

In the agricultural sector, both the left parties echoed the INC demand for land reforms with the distribution of surplus land to the landless, with the CPM providing an additional thrust for joint title deeds for women. The CPM also charted out a course for increased public investment in agriculture and its infrastructure to achieve self-sufficiency in foodgrains production, as opposed to the BJP's and TDP's vision of export-oriented crop diversification. It opposed sale of land to foreign companies but had no objection to encouraging animal husbandry, pisciculture, poultry farming, and sericulture as part of the improvement of the farming community. Both the CPM and CPI agreed with the INC that agrarian production and productivity could be boosted through technology applications, and promised remunerative prices for agricultural produce and cheap agricultural credit to farmers. The CPI also focused on minimum wages, social security, and welfare measures for agricultural workers.

The CPM agreed with the need for increased investment in infrastructure (power, communications, and transport), as proposed by both the TDP and the DMK, but it proposed a review of the power and telecommunications policies. The CPM also insisted on the strengthening of the public sector, while protecting domestic industry from imports and takeovers, and selectively encouraging the private sector in new productive areas. Both the left parties had no differences with the other parties in asking that small-scale industries be provided with cheap credit and marketing facilities, while the traditional sectors had to be protected. But both emphasised the requirement of minimum wages for workers in the unorganised sector. The CPM called for the revival of sick units, enforcement of labour laws, protecting trade union rights, higher provident fund interest rates, and workers' participation in management. The CPI firmly opposed the TDP's proposal to create special economic zones, arguing that these weakened workers' rights.

One-third reservation for women and laws for protection against sexual harassment and violence figured in the manifestos of both the left parties, as well as equal property rights and wages. The CPM opposed coercive population control and hazardous contraceptives, while agreeing to the need for credit and marketing

assistance to self-help groups. The CPI supported the demand for free secondary level education for girls. Both came out strongly in favour of prohibiting child labour and abolishing untouchability, reservations for the minorities, and protecting the rights of tribals and dalits. While the CPI wanted autonomy for the scheduled areas, the CPM felt that the panchayat system should be extended to the fifth and sixth schedule areas. Both were in favour of electoral and judicial reforms to ensure greater accountability, and the promotion of secular values. Thus, the conception of an 'alternative' path of development for the left parties was linked to the need to protect their base amongst the workers and peasants, and this subsequently paid them rich political dividends.

Consensus and Commitment

The CMP of the UPA government is a document that reveals what was the consensus that was forged between the allies and the supporting parties for governance. But the budget is the real indicator of the commitment to fulfil the promises made in the CMP. Thus, the National Employment Guarantee Act in the CMP, for creating 100 days of employment in asset-creating public works, is essentially an INC proposal, but meets with the endorsement of the DMK and the left parties. However, the 2004-05 budget does not incorporate it at all and only promises a food-for-work programme in 150 of the most backward districts. While Rs 6,000 crore has apparently been set aside for this programme, in fact it is at the cost of a 52 per cent cut in the Sampoorna Gramin Rozgar Yojana, entailing a saving of over Rs 5,000 crore. This is a far cry from the 'Right to Work' demanded by the left.

In agriculture, the CMP says that public investment will be stepped up, with irrigation as a priority, and rural cooperative credit doubled. There will be minimum wages for farm labour and the farmer will be protected from imports. Dryland farming, watershed and wasteland development, and water management will be encouraged along with crop and livestock insurance. This is not only part of the INC manifesto, but an amalgamation of the demands of all the other supporting parties. This seems to be in contrast to the manifestos of the BJP and the TDP that were in favour of much more modernisation, diversification, and competition in agriculture. However, while the budget gives no new support to agriculture, diversification has suddenly gained approval and

Rs 8,000 crore set aside for a rural infrastructure development fund. While credit enhancement through private institutions has been accepted, the revitalisation of cooperative credit has been rejected. The agri-business lobby, promoted by the private M S Swaminathan Foundation, has led the finance minister to promise support to a small farmers agri-business consortium.

As for industry, the CMP promises support to the services sector, impetus to textiles and jute, credit for small-scale industries (SSI), and modernisation of village industries, with a national fund for the unorganised, informal sector. While bowing to pressure from the left that successful Public Sector Enterprises (PSEs) not be privatised, it still advances a kind of 'transparent' privatisation with private sector assistance. It reinforces the left's demand for protecting labour. In other words, it is a mish-mash constituted out of the various manifestos of the UPA and its supporting parties, while stopping short of the BJP vision of making India a global player. But the budget provides the real intent by dropping 85 items from the SSI reserved list in order to promote competitive business while the Rs 10,000 crore promised for modernisation finds no mention. Instead of a National Commission, there is now the Investment Commission and the National Manufacturing Competitive Council. The revival of PSEs is to be attempted through disinvestment, and even closure. The target is clearly to promote exports through special zones, liberalise foreign investment, and adopt flexible labour laws.

With regard to the needs of the vulnerable groups, the CMP supports one-third reservation for women and laws against violence and discrimination, which is consistent with all the party manifestos. From the INC, it borrows the idea of turning over the responsibility for basic services to women's associations, and from the other parties it adopts the elimination of child labour and special care for the girl child. The rights of tribals, reservations for the weaker sections, and the revival of the National Integration Council are also part of the agenda, as are administrative reforms. But, once again, the budget belies many of these aspirations. Only an additional Rs 10,000 crore (out of a total of about Rs 4,80,000 crore) has been set aside for the CMP. The public distribution system appears to have been abandoned although there is a paltry Rs 40 crore as health insurance for the poor. The labour allocation has been marginally increased from Rs 835 crore to 924 crore, while subsidies are down from Rs 48,636 crore to Rs 42,021

crore. Revenue expenditure (or expenses on government) has been reduced, transferring responsibility for social sector spending to the banks, financial institutions, and multilateral agencies.

Bare Essentials

What is it, then, that we can see from this whole exercise? Is there any meaningful restructuring occurring that is going to make things easier for the working population, both in rural as well as urban areas? Are policies changing and programmes coming into place that will give the farmer, the daily wager, the tillers of soil and the drawers of water a little more space to breathe easier and give their children a better future? The answers are not easy to come by, particularly because what is said often differs significantly from what is done. What we hear from the manifestos essentially throws light on some of the basic differences between the main parties constituting the two alliances and those to the left of the political spectrum. The BJP and the TDP have argued for a continuation of the liberalisation policies that they were pursuing earlier, in the firm belief that eventually development benefits would trickle down to the poor. The INC and the DMK have stepped back a bit to accept that globalisation by itself may not be good enough and affirmative action is required to provide it with a 'human face'.

The CPM and the CPI have called for 'alternative policies', but appear to be caught between their commitment to their political constituencies, their faith in technology and modernisation, and their need to keep the communal forces at bay. The CMP is clearly a document that tries to reconcile contradictory pressures and demands while providing the 'human face'. But the budget is the indicator that much of this may be a mask that hides the real intentions of proceeding further with cutting back on state investment, privatising the profitable areas of the economy, letting market forces determine where priorities are going to lie, and encouraging self-help groups and non-government organisations to take over the delivery of services. In fact, it demonstrates that the competitive world of global capital and the basic needs of labour have little in common; that they stand in direct opposition to each other in the allocation of resources; and that 'alternative' pro-people policies require fundamental changes that cannot be accommodated within the present structure of parliamentary democracy. The vulnerable society is, once again, being beguiled into yet another exercise of 'feeling good'. [17]