

VIII. FOOD OR FOOD RIOTS

WE HAVE SAID THAT THE EXPERIENCE OF THE AUGUST HAPPENINGS only led the organisers of the "struggle" to indulge in demoralised theorising and disruptive activities.

British terror could quell by force what it called the "disturbances". It made the people not only more anti-British but also made them feel more helpless and look towards the Japs.

The Imperialists could outmanoeuvre you in the struggle for power and indulge in an orgy of repression to terrorise the people, but they could not solve any problem themselves. They tried to escape a political settlement but that only produced an all-round economic crisis whose worst form was the Bengal famine. Food prices began suddenly rising everywhere, it was a kitchen crisis in every home.

We give below our analysis of the food crisis and our slogans of action.

As early as October 1942, long before either the Government or any political party in the country, we saw the lowering clouds of the food crisis and warned the country to get ready for the battle for food, which we characterised as "a part of our struggle for unity and defence." We then wrote :

"The Government has no plan to solve the crisis. In its bankruptcy and incompetence it leaves the people to their fate.

"Our people cannot accept this dangerous situation which paralyses our defence against the Japanese invader. It cannot accept the bureaucratic stranglehold over people's food.

"They must therefore mobilise their full strength against profiteering prices, for a popular price policy, for a production-drive and increased food production for a National Government to organise national production and defence."

B. T. Ranadive, *Hands Off People's Food* (October 1942.)

In December 1942, we said that the key measures to fight the food crisis were price control and stock control which

“can be taken only if there is a free and willing co-operation, between the Government, the merchants’ associations and the people from top to bottom, from Centre down to the village. . . . But it can only be realised through complete patriotic unity of the country under a National Government.”

Editorial, *People’s War*, December 20, 1942.

In our resolution at the time of Gandhiji’s fast (February 1943) we said :

“The conflict between the Government and the people aggravated every problem in the land. Economic dislocation and crisis deepened into a crisis of the people, of food itself. . . .”

People’s War, February, 21, 1943.

But we clearly said that this did not mean that we say “we can do nothing till National Government comes” and sit quiet. We called for formation of All-Parties People’s Food Committees from the *mohallas* upwards, which would unearth hoards, take a census of food needs, demand price-control, rationing etc.

Rather than consider it inevitable and unfortunate, as the Imperialist apologists were arguing, we nailed the food crisis down as the inevitable working out of Imperialist policy, and we intensified our agitation against deadlock and for your release. We also evolved immediate constructive slogans.

Animal Theory Of Revolution

Our opponents saw in the food-crisis another opportunity for the “revolution” of their imagination and food-riots as the first step towards that “revolution.”

Jai Prakash Narain, in his *Second Letter to Fighters for Freedom* referred to charity and said :

“But charity is not enough. It will not solve the problem. Fighters have therefore the job—their most important job in the circumstances—to create feelings of resentment and anger in the needy and starving and to turn those feeling against the foreign power which is at bottom responsible for

all this misery. Let the hungry create a situation in which normal British administration becomes impossible. *Let us tell them, not only tell but help them to do it—to seize food where they can get it. . . .* In cities and towns too the hunger, the passivity and despair of the hungry and needy should be turned into resentments and anger and given concrete, active shape of demonstration and direct action. . . .”

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Ram Manohar Lohia, another Congress Socialist leader, in his pamphlet, *Rebels Must Advance*, wrote that there was no hoarding and profiteering and the demand for price-control and rationing was an anti-national demand. He said :

“The city-poor must also understand that *all this cry of the Government against hoarding and profiteering is false. . . .* I cannot understand the *infamy* of people who call themselves Congress Municipal parties and the like and demand this control and rationing or that, for they might as well demand fresh taxation for the war-effort. The city poor must, until they have the strength to seize Government stores, *denounce, by demonstrations* and occasional jail-going, this *Government profiteering that goes under the black-mailing name of control and rationing.*”

Rebels Must Advance, p. 19, January, 1944.

The reality was the opposite. In fact the Government would not introduce either price-control or rationing until a big hue and cry was raised by all sections of the people.

After we had heard them preach that your continued detention was the key to the next round of revolution, this did not come to us as a surprise. If some people can be so crazy as to imagine that revolution will come through British repression, what was fantastic about their believing that revolution will come through Indian hunger ?

Theirs was not only a heartless but a childish silly concept.

It is what may be called the Animal Theory of Revolution. It could only have arisen in the heads of upper class snobs to whom the masses are unthinking animals who will not fight till

they are driven to desperation. Their revolutionary tactics were therefore to condemn those who were trying to relieve the misery of the masses, and then come to the conclusion—**STARVE THE MASSES AND YOU GET A REVOLUTION.**

What shall we say of “revolutionaries” who think that starvation will lead to revolution when in fact starvation saps the human-will and even takes the fight out of animals?

Airy frustrated intellectuals who neither knew living humanity nor read revolutionary history aright could theorise thus, irrespective of the fact whether it got our people food or bullets.

Their slogan remained only a slogan. They could not organise one big food-riot. There were a few individual lootings. This is how they stood self-condemned.

Our Policy - Organise Relief

Our Party sunk all its resources and workers in organising the most widespread relief movement with the co-operation not only of local Congressmen but also of Leaguers and even Mahasabhaites, on as broad and united a basis as possible.

Successful food riots, on the other hand, would not have got food for the needy but only opened the way for the police to devastate our hungry villages—and, multiplied on a large scale in Bengal, could only have produced internal anarchy, the very thing that the Japs prayed for before they began their invasion.

Having failed to organise riots, these “revolutionaries” tried to oppose our relief work by two arguments:

1. Among older Congressmen, they tried to spread confusion by plugging hard the argument: With the leaders in jail, how is it possible to go in for relief work which entails co-operation with the hated Government?

2. Among younger Congressmen—the new Left-minded cadre thrown up by the August movement—their line was that the Communists, by organising relief, are helping the Government to stay in power.

As self-confidently as they had asserted that the freedom revolution was sabotaged by the Communists, they now asserted that the food revolution was also sabotaged by our relief work.

Then we kept the workers back from sabotage and from aiding the Japs. Now we endeavoured to feed the hungry by getting food from the Government and the prosperous.

With the older Congressman we argued: Is not relief work the best service of the people, in the best traditions of the Congress?

We told him:

“If all the leaders of the locality come together in Joint Committees would that give greater or less confidence to the people? Would they be helping the Government or getting people’s grievances redressed and checking bureaucratic bungling? Has not the Congress itself followed such a line in times of distress? To go on arguing whether to co-operate or non-co-operate was to escape the immediate duty to your dying people.”

With the younger Congressman too we carried on an explanatory campaign.

We explained to him the root cause of why he finds the call for relief uninspiring. We told him that the principal reason was that relief work conjured up in his mind the idea of charity by the rich for the poor, because of the way relief work used to be organised by the older leaders in the old days. We asked him to see how we were organising relief as a self-help movement by the people themselves in which we made collections on a mass-scale, from the rich and the poor alike and in which the needy actively participate, and thus how the sense of common solidarity grows, without creating a sense of inferiority in those who get relief, how the result of our activity is a greater sense of self-confidence among the people rather than greater dependence on the Government.

Our opponents talked of revolution and stayed safely inside their rooms, we worked among the people rousing their democratic consciousness and working away our hardest to see that they did what was immediately possible to save themselves.

To prevent the famine spreading all over India we advanced the slogans of rationing and control long before the Government thought of them. Once again we had to fight a run-

ning battle till our propaganda and the actual experience of life made these measures accepted as necessary.

The argument against us was that we were helping the Government to exist, while open non-co-operation with and secret organised resistance to all its food measures would bring it down.

We argued that this was the same thing as stating that people must go without food so that freedom may come.

Why Rationing And Control ?

We explained how rationing and control were essential measures in war-time. Rationing ensured equitable distribution and control was the only way to check the greed of the hoarders. They had been resorted to in every country of the world. The food crisis had become so acute because ours being a foreign Government it neither seriously thought nor dared to implement these measures. To oppose rationing and control because they had been introduced by the foreign Government would be the same as to say,—don't go to the hospital it is run by the Government, or don't send your children to school as it is run by the British *Sarkar* !

We explained how the real problem was that because the Government was a foreign government, its administrative machine was effete, soulless and isolated from the people ; Government food measures would be implemented through the hoarders and not with the co-operation of the people.

Therefore, we argued, the way to check the malpractices of officials and the selfishness of the hoarders was to form All-Parties' Food Committees to expose bureaucratic bungling and corruption and the hoarders' anti-national activities and to formulate the people's demands and grievances.

We did succeed in forming such Committees during the most critical days of the food crisis and we did get the co-operation of hundreds of Congressmen, and we sunk ourselves in doing the main job of mass mobilisation behind these united Committees. We had the satisfaction of seeing the people bless us while, of course, the bureaucrats and hoarders cursed us.

It was during the Bengal famine first, and later with food as

the main issue that our Party press became famous on a country-wide scale—among all political circles, whether friendly, neutral or hostile to us—for exposures of Government policy, for exposing the anti-social deeds of arch-hoarders and for objective reports about the condition of the people.

Progressive intellectuals called us food experts.

Elderly Congressmen enquired how we managed to get all facts and wondered from where our workers got their enthusiasm, when their own mood was "nothing is possible, so why waste time and do anything ?"

In this period the most common remark we used to hear from fellow-Congressmen was : "We agree with your food policy and will work with you though we don't agree with your war policy."

It was easy enough for us to see how our Food policy came from the same source as our own War and National policy, from our own patriotic urge and capacity to understand reality, and to suggest at the same time a practical solution in the interests of our people. We had no illusions that the general mass of Congressmen would find it equally easy to understand how our food and war policies were parts of one national policy for our people, because of the prevailing prejudices, the suppression of our national movement and the utter confusion in the national mind. But it was enough for us if there was agreement on the immediate issue facing the people.

Introduction of rationing and control prevented the deepening of economic crisis. But the stabilisation of the prices that took place was at a very high level, 200-300% of the pre-war prices.

Profiteers Become "Patriotic"

This was inevitable because the profiteers themselves were in charge of enforcing control, and all that a foreign Government could get out of them was a promise not to make the situation worse. This was enough for the Imperialist bureaucracy, they were satisfied if Indian Big Business gave and implemented the promise not to smash what to them was only their war economy. This was also enough for the Indian profiteers, it assured

them very high profits and they could go on putting the blame on the alien Government in order to save their own skins.

It is therefore in this period that the anti-control and anti-Communist propaganda becomes a regular feature of our nationalist papers. If you wish, we can get you a *dossier* prepared on how the majority of the nationalist press passed into the grip of and was seriously influenced by the profiteers and how a systematic campaign of slander and misrepresentation was run against our Party. It is a sordid tale of retaining popularity by being formally anti-Government and of turning popular anti-British feeling in favour of their paymasters.

They dulled the social conscience by arguing away that hoarding is inevitable under Imperialism, high prices are due to controls which are a part of British war-effort in India, and they circulated all sorts of anti-Communist slanders from every possible angle. We know how Mr. G. D. Birla is the great planner of this press racket against us and in favour of his class. It had not only ultimate objectives but an immediate one—to isolate our anti-hoarding campaign and prevent it spreading to the middle-class.

One of the dire consequences of the economic crisis has been that it broke the back of the middle-class, the very class which had given birth to Indian renaissance and the national movement. The only way for it to be able to maintain its traditional standard of life was to become a part and parcel of the system of official corruption and take bribes like the rest of the officials or to become part and parcel of the system of hoarding, by becoming agents or sub-agents of the bigger war-rich. When nothing seemed to be stable and no settlement was in sight, everyone appeared to be looking after himself, whether individuals, communities or leaders.

The old standards not only of political but also of social behaviour disappeared during this period. Politically all are against the British and socially all are against each other. Individually each is for himself. Intellectually the hunt is for some short-cut to freedom for the country and to some big money for oneself. They had seen their old world die and with it all old political and cultural values died inside their own mind. The

new world as they understand it, is ruled by the law of the jungle and what matters is power and not principles.

Soon enough and unfortunately this became true of Congress homes too.

We are writing this with great pain and in sorrow. Every one of us had to fight the battle in his own home, see that our own relations do not take to bribes in their office like the rest, see that our peasant fathers do not sell their surplus grain to the hoarder, see that our Ma does not get tempted to go to the black-market for better quality rice or wheat. We had to expel comrades from the Party they loved and had served but who failed to keep to normal standards in abnormal times.

Most Congressmen only blamed Imperialism for the economic crisis and bemoaned the greed of the hoarders and argued that nothing could be done till the war was over or settlement came. Anti-British bitterness became transformed into helplessness among the patriots too. One had to live through this period to realise how all that was noble and grand in our national life was falling to pieces.

We have saved our soul and struggled to stir the conscience of the people around by organising a mass exposure campaign against the corrupt officials and anti-social hoarders. We were successful in the sense that our Party press and mass agitators became a terror to the corrupt and anti-social elements, and whenever the sufferings of the poor people became unbearable beyond any point, they would come to our Party office in the same spirit and with the same purpose as they used to go to the local Congress office in normal times. They knew if any fighting had to be done we would organise them for it; if any rushing about was necessary, we would do it ourselves.

National Government - Final Solution

During 1943-44 if there were any political arrests for open mass activity, they were of our Party workers for the anti-corruption and anti-hoarding campaigns which they organised in their localities. If you desire, we can get you the exact figures.

As the food situation stabilised but scarcity of other com-

modities of daily life became acute we helped to organise co-operative efforts for the distribution of cloth, kerosene, sugar, etc., in the localities where we were strong. You can read some specimen stories of our work in the *People's War*.

Those who slandered us said that we were doing all this to become popular and exploit the absence of the Congress from the field. But the spontaneous sentiments of the common people were: "You are doing what the Congress used to do and would have done if the leaders were out."

This gave us strength and this was our pride.

We had no illusions that we were solving the economic crisis by our activities; they were nothing more than ameliorative measures, but they helped the people, gave them self-confidence and hope. Day in and day out we related the economic crisis to political deadlock and popularised the need for National Government and your release as the only real solution.

At the time of Gandhiji's fast we said:

"We specially appeal to the working class, kisan and student organisations to rally behind the campaign for Gandhiji's release and to isolate those who try to exploit Gandhiji's fast for creating anarchy. One simple step forward and we force the bureaucracy to bend and save our entire nation from untold disaster. To fail to take this simple step means death and destruction for all."

People's War, February 21, 1943.

In the Manifesto issued by our Party on May Day, 1943, we said:

"Nothing but our failure to unite the major organisations has kept power and National Government from us. Today this failure keeps the nation's leaders in jail and enforces starvation on our millions—Hindus and Muslims alike. It nearly cost us Gandhiji's life when he was on fast."

People's War, April 25, 1943.

We used to popularise the demand of National Government for National Defence. After the food crisis began we made it National Government for National Defence and People's Food.