

CPI(M)

Lok Sabha Election 2009

AAM AADMI SUFFERS IN 'HIGH GROWTH' INDIA

Urban Poor

CAMPAIGN FOLDER



Vote CPI(M)

**Strengthen the Left and Democratic Forces
to Ensure an Alternative Secular
Government at the Centre**

The Congress party has appropriated the song “Jai Ho” from the film *Slumdog Millionaire* as its theme song for the elections. The reality of the lives of millions of poor people living in slums is of little consequence to the ruling party. This is hardly surprising, given the utter failure of successive Congress-led governments at the centre to provide a comprehensive housing policy, responsible for slums in the first place.

The urban poor form a substantial section of the population. In absolute terms, the size of the urban population is about 285 million spread over 5,161 cities and towns of varied sizes. With the intensification of agrarian distress, lakhs of families migrate to towns and cities in search of employment. In Delhi alone, 38 per cent of the total poor have migrated to the city for employment purposes. The extreme vulnerability of this section was starkly revealed in Mumbai when goons of the local party brutally attacked migrant workers while the Congress Government in Maharashtra did nothing.

The Common Minimum Programme of the United Progressive Alliance had committed to bring in a “Comprehensive programme for urban renewal; massive expansion of social housing particularly for slum dwellers” and according “top priority for providing drinking water to all sections” in urban areas. It also promised to enact a employment guarantee legislation for the urban areas.

Five years down the line there has been no perceptible change in the appalling living conditions of the poor in the urban areas. Hunger, homelessness, and destitution continue to haunt the poor and the promise of a better life is but a mirage.

The reality under the Congress-led government is:

~ Increase in urban poverty by almost 6 per cent in the last decade.

~ The privatization of basic services being pushed by the Central Government has made life hell for the vast majority of the urban population. The neglect of public health and education and totally inadequate resources from the Central Government to increase these services has forced people to go to private schools and hospitals at exorbitant costs.

~ Destruction of the rationing system due to the wrong food policies of the government leading to widespread malnutrition and hunger in urban India.

~ Large-scale unemployment and underemployment. As detailed in the Arjun Sengupta report, the vast majority survives on Rs. 20 a day. Shockingly, in the capital of India, which

symbolises the skewed patterns of growth, 52 per cent of the poor households do not have access to a dependable occupation and secure incomes. Yet the Congress-led government refused to extend the Employment Guarantee Act to urban areas.

~ The policy of encouraging corporates into the retail trade has had an extremely negative impact on the livelihood of lakhs of families, including small shopkeepers in urban areas. The shameful backdoor entry permitted by the Congress-led government to FDI in a range of sectors shows its utter disregard for this sector which provides livelihood and employment to crores of people.

~ Judicial interventions in support of neo-liberal frameworks of urban development have deprived large sections of street vendors, small retail traders, of their rights to livelihood by placing restriction on their areas of work. These coincide with the thrust to open up retail trade to big corporates and MNCs. In Delhi, under judicial directions, hawkers have been evicted from pavements and other places where they have been vending wares since long. A massive drive is on in Delhi to cleanse the city of hawkers and slums, concealing its own failures, to make the city “clean” before the Commonwealth Games in 2010.

~ While prime land is captured by urban crorepatitis, the slum population is constantly increasing from the 41 million enumerated in the last census. It is estimated that half of Mumbai’s population and more than half of Delhi’s population live in slums in the most terrible conditions without water, sanitation and minimum civic facilities.

~ The lack of civic facilities in urban areas particularly where the working class and middle class populations live is absolutely shocking.

~ 34 per cent of urban households do not have their principal source of water within their premises. 30 per cent of the urban population do not have latrines in their homes. Only 10 per cent of Delhi’s slums are covered by sanitation. Around 85 per cent of slums in Delhi did not have even community toilets.

~ In most cities and towns public toilets have been converted into pay and use toilets. A study showed that on an average a household of 4 (in Delhi) had to pay Rs. 12 a day for a single visit to the toilet and a bath (Re. 1 for the toilet and Rs. 2 for a bath per person). Can a poor family afford this?

~ The number of urban homeless is increasing. For example a study conducted by the Department of Urban Development, Government of Delhi, shows that there are around 1 lakh homeless people in Delhi alone. There are negligible facilities

like night shelters for such sections. In particular the plight of urban street children is of deep concern. Objectionably in Delhi women are excluded from the night shelters run by the MCD.

~ The cost of electricity has increased due to the privatization of distribution of electricity under both the NDA and UPA governments. Electricity meters provided by contractors from private companies are faulty and grossly inflate the units of electricity forcing poor families to pay exorbitant bills for electricity they have not used. This is a direct result of the neo-liberal policies pushed by the Central Government in the power sector.

~ Lack of an effective public transport system and more reliance on private operators has worsened conditions in the urban areas. The high costs of diesel and petrol have increased transport costs substantially. The steps to curb pollution through phasing out old vehicles, autorickshaws off the roads as decreed by different courts must however be accompanied by concrete steps to ensure cheap credit to buy new vehicles.

~ There is an acute problem of indebtedness among urban households which were denied institutional credit but remained unaddressed by the UPA Government.

FAULTY POLICIES

Instead of working within the framework of the Common Minimum Programme and expanding the rights of the urban poor, the Congress-led government used the highly flawed concept begun by the BJP-led NDA government for “urban renewal” and gave it a new name under the Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Fund. These are prescriptions from international lending agencies within the neo-liberal framework which both the BJP and the Congress accept. Urban planning, far from being people-oriented, has become infrastructure-oriented and that also only in selected areas to suit the requirements of corporates and the rich. People are secondary.

The entire thrust of the programme is against the interests of the poor and the middle classes as it is based on private-public participation, a euphemism for what is actually privatisation.

Indeed the totally erroneous approach and the fillip such an approach gives to crony capitalism was seen in the case of the Hyderabad metro project. The Congress government in Andhra Pradesh handed over the project to the Maytas company against the strong objections of the projects central advisor. The company which got a sweetheart deal from the Congress was

later found to be deeply involved in the infamous Satyam scam. It was the Planning Commission Chairman who personally tried to force the Kerala Government to also adopt such a route in the name of PPP for its metro project, which of course the Kerala LDF Government refused.

JNNURM: NO PLACE FOR THE POOR

Announced with much fanfare the avowed aim of the JNNURM has been to improve the urban infrastructure and tackle poverty in over 60 major cities in India (35 cities with million-plus population, capital city in every state, and a small number of other cities of historical, religious or tourist importance). But as can be seen above the programme has had little impact in the lives of the mass of the urban population.

The retrograde features of the JNNURM include:

~ Conditions on states as a prerequisite for providing funds to states through JNNURM. There is no mechanism for the involvement of the states in the planning which is top down and therefore will be disastrous.

~ The “Mandatory Reforms” for cities wishing to avail JNNURM assistance include repeal of Urban Land Ceiling Act; imposition of user fees for water and sanitation; public-private participation models for development, management and financing of urban infrastructure, etc. In other words charging the poor for even such essentials like water and sanitation.

~ The emphasis on the PPP route is a sure recipe for accentuating disparities and pricing the poor out of the system. These conditionalities are not only anti-poor but are also an encroachment on states’ rights.

~ The model municipal law which is being pushed by the Central Government runs contrary to the spirit of progressive decentralization and the interests of the urban poor envisaged in the 74th Constitution Amendment which, in any case, is far from being implemented in its true spirit in most parts of the country.

~ The whole JNNURM concept and thrust is infrastructure-centered. The promised aid is a ruse to force the local bodies to undertake neo-liberal reforms, while at the same time divesting the planning process from the democratically elected local bodies. It is therefore anti-democratic.

~ It is against the very concept of providing free houses for the poor, saying that a minimum 12 per cent beneficiary contribution should be stipulated, and in the case of SC/ST/BC/OBC/PH and other weaker sections it should be 10 per cent.

With the increased costs of land and construction this will be too expensive for ordinary families.

~ There is no specification for the standard for these basic services to be provided. Instead, it has transgressed into areas that lie with other departments like health and education.

Except for the Left-led states of West Bengal, Kerala and Tripura, all states have repealed Urban Land Ceiling Acts leading to a huge increase in land prices taking it out of the reach of even middle class people, leave alone the poor.

CONCLUSION

The Congress, like the BJP before it, has failed to work out any comprehensive plan for the urban poor and working people. Both the Congress-led UPA and the BJP-led NDA are enthusiastic advocates of the same neo-liberal trajectory prescribed by international monetary agencies. With their emphasis on privatization of services at the cost of its universal provision, the conditions of the urban poor cannot be expected to change with these parties in power. Both these forces representing the pro-rich orientation of policies have to be defeated.

The CPI(M) appeals to the people to vote for the formation of a pro-people alternative secular government at the centre.

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