

The NYAY Scheme of the Congress*

Prabhat Patnaik

My attitude to the NYAY scheme of the Congress is similar to my attitude to a benevolent monarchy. While a benevolent monarchy is better than a tyrannical one, any monarchy is repugnant compared to a republic. Likewise compared to the current neo-liberal regime any scheme of transfers to the poor is welcome. But NYAY amounts to a largesse by the government, an act of charity towards the bottom quintile, not the institution of a universal economic right to decent living. I find targeted transfer schemes like NYAY repugnant compared to a regime of universal rights.

Poverty and unemployment in society are caused by the social arrangement under which we live, not by any fault of the poor and the unemployed. It is society's responsibility to eliminate them; social arrangements must be such that they cease to exist. Hence instead of the people having to be "accommodated" within the financial and other constraints imposed by a particular social arrangement (because of which the number of beneficiaries and the amounts of handout have to be kept "suitably" low), the arrangements must be so altered that every member of society is entitled by right to a decent living.

The NYAY by its very conception is a charitable scheme, not the means of realizing a democratic order. It seeks to create "neo-liberalism with a human face", which is why it is, and will always remain, open to being altered, amended, postponed, kept in abeyance or whittled down in scope, depending upon the circumstances. The fact that so few details are known about it, such as how the beneficiaries are to be identified, how the resources are to be raised, how inter se equity among the poor is to be ensured, is an ominous pointer to its "malleability".

My worry is for two reasons in particular. One is the "non-malleability" of neo-liberalism, its ineluctable spontaneous tendency to create poverty at one pole and wealth at another. "Neo-liberalism with a human face" therefore is a contradiction in terms, which can at best be a transient effort. The second is the insensitivity among large sections of the Indian elite to the plight of the poor.

Even MGNREGS, despite being an economic right created by parliament, has got whittled down. NYAY which does not even create a right has therefore very little chance. Still, like a benevolent monarch, it is welcome.

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