



BJP evicting hawkers and slum dwellers with bulldozers and sten gun in West Bengal

It is no spectacle of Gaza or West Bank. It is the state of West Bengal where one can see an array of bulldozers backed by a huge contingent of sten gun-wielding police forces in a “cleaning operation” of “illegal constructions” on the lands of the government and the railways at wee hours of night to convenience the train passengers and footpath users. Within minutes, the tottering structures of hawkers’ stalls, venders’ kiosks and shanties are being razed to the ground. No request, no entreating is being entertained. No wailing of the abjectly poor victims is having any effect on the minds of the uniformed brigade of state administration. And thus, within a span of two months from the day the BJP government took the reins in West Bengal, it was clear who are considered as principal enemy of the new dispensation. Not the black marketers, hoarders, criminals, rapists, anti-socials, drug-peddlers, unscrupulous realty syndicates, bribe-takers, embezzlers of public money, fraudsters, scamsters— but the downtrodden segment of the populace, the hand to mouth category, the unemployed youths and even the aged trying to eke out a bare living by hawking food and other items of utility at the railway platforms, by the side of the roads and often in the running trains risking life or those staying in makeshift shanties along the train tracks or sewage canals after having been uprooted from their home and hearth, the jobless agricultural workers, retrenched labourers, marginal peasants, the housemaids and such other hapless millions. Indeed, the world has two sides—the few abysmally rich and the millions of impoverished, wretched, destitute-oppressed who are being suppressed, deprived and persecuted. And the government though elected by the people including these penurious millions are wedded to the task of making the poor poorer and the rich, richer. Stripped of both income and shelter, majority of these marginalized communities now find themselves pushed to extreme destitution. The evicted poor people are spending sleepless nights with their children and old members of the family under the bare sky, in sweltering heat, severe downpour and deadly thunders.

Who is responsible for such misery of the Indian citizens? They themselves or the government administration who has waged a war against them? The promise to provide a home to everybody has proved to be a hoax. All the governments irrespective of hues have been ardent servitors of the ruling capitalist class with pretended avowedness to serve the people. They can waive thousands of crores of evaded taxes to the industrial magnets, write off crores of rupees of defaulted bank loans of the dishonest business tycoons, give thousands of acres of land, even arable or forest lands to the trillionaires virtually free of cost and change laws one after another to benefit these super rich. To the governments, evading tax, defaulting bank

loans, swindling public money, manipulating share prices, building structures with low quality material and flouting design specifications, plundering funds of holy shrines, amassing huge wealth by using religion or blind faiths as tools to deceive people, adulteration, etc., is no violation of law. But when the poor out of haplessness occupy a part of the railway platform, or trackside or footpaths, they are punished for tweaking law. When a judicial pronouncement talks of giving precedence to faith over evidence, it is perfectly consistent with the law book. But when a semi-clad semi-fed rickety fellow vends spicy puffed rice (jhalhuri) in a train compartment, it is violation of law. In fact, one such jhalhuri-selling hawker has committed suicide after being debarred from vending.

There are nearly ten million street hawkers in India. They are buyers and sellers of variety of goods. From food items to books, imitation articles, bags, shoes, cosmetics, and many other things are sold. Thus, they are at present a part of the economy. People get their necessary things from them at cheap rate. If they have to shut down their stalls and shops, there will be a chain effect on economy.

The railway authorities by thumping chest are arguing that the hawkers and slum dwellers had illegally occupied the railway land. So, they must be evicted from those areas. There's no question of rehabilitation or compensation. But question is, are they staying on the trackside or roadside out of volition or under compulsion? If they were provided houses and means of earning, would they have been forced to run vending stalls on the platform, or in the station adjacent areas? Even after 79 years of independence, crores of people have no home. They live under bare sky, under bridges, flyovers, and on footpath.

The government argues that the hawkers are to vacate platforms and surrounding areas to ensure safety of the passengers. Never heard of a hawker creating any obstruction to or problem for the passengers or causing accidents. Rather, these hawkers are, besides providing food and other items to the passengers at cheap prices, are very helpful and cooperative. Lady passengers feel safe due to the presence of the hawkers. Whenever any accident occurs, the hawkers promptly jump into action. They also protest against anti-social activities in station premises.

What is to be noticed is that while the Indian Railways is evicting the hawkers, they are giving trade license to the MNCs like Pepsi, Coca Cola, KFC, Wow! Momo, Amul, etc. So, they are friendly to the big-moneyed companies and antagonistic to the common hawkers and vendors. In Sealdah, Howrah, New Delhi, Delhi Junction, ANVT, CSMT-Mumbai, SMVT-Bangalore, Chennai Junction, and other stations, stalls are allotted to the renowned companies. In Sealdah, Kolkata, while food vendors to ordinary hawkers are being kicked out of the platform and surrounding area, the railway department has given space to the P C Chandra Jewellers, Anjali Jewellers, Gita Press and others. The common hawkers have been demanding trade license for long. But they have been denied. Because what is up its sleeves is to corporatize even hawking in the railway stations. So, the axe has fallen on the poor hawkers. The West Bengal chief minister has asked the hawkers to first remove their stalls from the railway-areas. Then only the government would think about their rehabilitation. That is akin to putting the cart before the horse! Rehabilitation is a human right. Right to living, right to education right of existence—all are violated by this eviction.

Next a very pertinent question. Is everything legal is legitimate as well? In that case, how are laws changed from time to time, giving recognition to legitimacy? Sati system had legal sanction. But it was changed when there was movement led by Raja Rammohan to give legitimacy priority over law.

Secondly, in any class-divided society like ours, law is always class law meaning formulated to serve and protect the interest of the ruling class. In feudalism, when a serf failed to give rent to the landlord because of crop failure, he was whipped or dispossessed of his land. As per law, it was ok. But in the eyes of legitimacy, it was inhuman. When a factory owner retrenches a worker in capitalism, it is sanctified by prevailing law. But if a worker goes on strike, he is accused of flouting law. In a capitalist society, exploitation of man by man is legal. But protest against that exploitation is viewed as illegal and hence punishable. So where is the fairness or legitimacy? “Everyone is equal in the eyes of law”—exists merely on paper. Long back, Romain Rolland, the great humanist luminary, had said that “*where order is injustice, disorder is the beginning of justice*”. Elaborating further, Comrade Shibdas Ghosh, Founder General Secretary of the SUCI(C) and an outstanding Marxist thinker of the era, had shown: “*...in this exploitative social system, what is legal need not always be legitimate, justified, moral and humane. Similarly, everything illegal in the eye of law need not be illegitimate, unjustified, immoral and inhumane.*” (SW Vol III)

So, when a henchman of the exploitative system cites the question of legality, it sounds like prattles. Everything should be viewed from the angle of justifiability in keeping with what ought to be as per the law of social development. Same is applicable to the case of ongoing forcible eviction of hawkers and slum dwellers in West Bengal on the lines of the Yogi Adityanath-led UP government.

Our Party, our Trade Union wing AIUTUC and activists of all our class and mass organizations are wholeheartedly involved in resisting this inhuman eviction by involving common people. Some vote-oriented forces are trying to misguide the hawkers by saying that eviction would be stalled by knocking at the door of the judiciary. This is a despicable attempt to pour cold water on the fighting spirit of the oppressed people. Legitimate demands can be achieved only by embracing the path of movement under correct leadership.