

NEW ECONOMIC POLICY—CONCERN FOR WOMEN'

The beginning of nineties marked the accentuation of strains for Indian women with state giving in to the IMF-WB dictated programme, structural adjustment and economic reforms, life has become more difficult for the weaker and marginalised sections of society. And given the context of Patriarchy women have not only been the worst sufferers of this, there is little in these that can offer them any consolation for the times that are to come. The policies of liberalization of economy, the shrinking of public sector, the trend towards privatization, the emphasis on deregulation, the cut-backs in social sector and related spending by the state, the concern for efficiency and profitability, in short the acceptance of profits rather than distributive justice as the basis for all economic processes, is only likely to intensify contradictions in Indian society.

State policies have not only contributed to an increased rate of inflation, the rise in prices has been uneven for various sections of society, with poor being the worst victims, for it varied in respect of various items of consumption. Between December 1992 and October 1993 foodgrain prices shot up by 12.7 per cent with prices of wheat rising by 12 per cent, those of bajra by 17 per cent, of barley 25.9 per cent. The prices of pulses shot up by 37.6 per cent, with those of gram rising by 72.8 per cent. Vegetable prices too shot up by 40.8 per cent, with onion jumping by 160.5 per cent and potatoes by 68.5 per cent. Sugar rose by 20.5 per cent, khand sari by 22.3 per cent and gur by 37.5 per cent. The havoc that policies for promoting agricultural exports is going to play with the poor is not difficult to see, if one realises how scarcity and scarcity related price-increases have always taken things beyond the reach of the poorest strata of society. And if one knows anything from the various analysis of nutritional patterns within the family the pain of most cutbacks in food consumption at the level of household is borne primarily by women who try to ensure supplies to other members of family.

The pattern of policies being adopted also will have far-reaching implications for the labour market structure. Already such trends are showing with sharp reduction in organized sector employment and rapid increase in unorganized and informal sector employment, the employment of women has undoubtedly increased in the recent years, but conditions of work have only worsened the insecure and uncertain conditions of work in the informal sector and the fact that increased participation of women, especially, poor women in the labour market forced by

circumstances, marked by the worsening economic conditions of the poor, does raise important questions about the nature of changes being introduced though the new economic policies the much, talked about feminization of labour in unorganised sector is in effect a reflection on the helplessness of women in the changing economic context.

The increased burden on the girl-child to take care of the tasks being carried out by their mothers is only generating pressures for the withdrawal of girl child from schools. This further weakens the prospects of their acquiring the capacity to improve their economic status as they grow up. The trends in this respect are very upsetting.

The unbridled exploitation of natural resources, not only being facilitated by de-regulation but also actually being promoted through export promotion drives is also increasing the hardships of women who depend on these resources for meeting the needs of food, food and fuel for their families. Declining common property resources as a consequence of the inclination towards their privatization/leasing at industries on the pretext of development is also adding to the hardships of women who have relied on these resources for carrying out their traditionally assigned responsibility of running the household.

The increasing trend towards state withdrawal from social welfare activities and promotion of non-governmental organisations, with major responsibilities to carry out even state policy objectives and the funding of these organisations by various donor agencies is only pushing state policies in the directions acceptable to donors. A major part of loans being given in the name of health are being diverted towards population control programmes and that voluntary sector is being mobilized to carry out these programmes. This is not only at the cost of overlooking the basic health needs of women, this has also become an import mechanism through which extremely harmful contraceptive technologies are being promoted to profit the multinational producing them the acceptance of Dunkel proposals and the signing of GATT agreement has only worsened the possibility of state policies being linked to the needs of the poor.

Whether it is the policies of drugs or it is the public distribution system, the scope for relating the policies to the needs of the weak and marginalised sections of society has been reduced, thereby raising important issues of threats to possibilities of social justice as a consequence of

their policies. Efforts being made to co-opt. women's movement through relative funding of women's groups and issues by state and international donor agencies, pore a major challenge. Especially, in a context, where state is giving up its responsibilities to provide for women's needs and to create conditions for straightening their position, in response to the demands of the women's movement. The

challenge is a serious one and calls for collective struggles against the very framework of new economic policies, women's victimization must not be permitted at any cost, it social justice is still of same relevance to society.

