



Congress is trying to corner BJP on economy, one press conference at a time

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New Delhi: In a bid to corner the Narendra Modi government over the slowing Indian economy, the Congress has claimed that India became a more miserable country last year after its performance on the Global Misery Index worsened.

In a statement Thursday, Congress spokesperson Manish Tewari said India is back among the 20 most miserable countries in the country, with a score of 21.5.

India was the 20th most miserable country in 2016, he said.

The misery index developed by US economist Steve Hanke measures the score based on four fundamental economic parameters: inflation, lending rates, employment levels, and growth in gross domestic product (GDP).

According to Tewari, the unemployment rate in India stands at 8.5 per cent. The headline inflation rate is about 7.35 per cent, the lending rate is broadly at about 9.4 per cent. If one subtracts the annualised growth of GDP, which is about 3.5 per cent, from this, one gets a score of 21.5.

While Tewari has claimed a worsening performance of India — with the country falling from a better 44th rank in 2018 to an under-20 finish this time — the Cato Institute's Hanke hasn't yet released the rankings for 2019.

Tewari added that Global Misery Index is the correct metric to measure the economy of India today rather than the GDP.

Frontal attack on Modi government

The latest Congress move came ahead of the start of the Budget session Friday. Finance Minister Nirmala Sitharaman is set to present the Union Budget 2021-22 Saturday.

Since Monday, senior Congress leaders have started to hold daily press conferences to highlight the failure of the Modi government in addressing economic issues. On Tuesday, party spokesperson Gaurav Vallabh raised the issue of unemployment and debt. On Friday, Rajya Sabha MP Rajeev Gowda will raise similar issues.

Former finance minister P. Chidambaram will hold a press conference Saturday after the Union Budget is announced.

Digging deep into economic statistics to show the “poor” state of the economy, the Congress has been coming out with data to puncture Modi government’s claims of the economy being on the right track.

For instance, it has claimed that per capita debt has increased by Rs 27,200 in the last five and a half years. Further, for every rupee earned in 2014, the debt component was 43 per cent, which increased to 48 per cent in 2019.

“If you look at any economic parameter on which you can benchmark the Indian economy, you would find that it actually validates this (misery) score completely,” Tewari said in his statement.

The Indian economy is expected to grow at an 11-year low of 5 per cent. Fears of stagflation or rising inflation accompanied by stagnant growth are also emerging with inflation in December crossing the 7-per cent mark — breaching the upper end of the Reserve Bank of India’s mandated inflation target.

Other planned move

Not limited to holding press meets, former Congress president Rahul Gandhi is also likely to go on tours across states to address issues related to the common public, said a senior party leader who didn’t wish to be named.

The move comes at a time when the opposition has been unable to leverage the poor performance of the Modi government in managing the economy.

According to the leader, it was felt that the BJP was shifting the narrative away from important issues, especially with elections and budget around the corner.

“The publicity department is spearheading it (the campaign) and the material is prepared in consultation with the senior leaders and the research unit of the party too. We are merely raising the same issues in these press conferences which the general public is also debating but the government is turning a blind eye to it,” said the leader.

Last year too, ahead of the assembly elections in Maharashtra and Haryana in October, the Opposition, especially the Congress, had targeted the Modi government on the economic downturn.