

14 THE EDITORIAL PAGE

WORDLY WISE

THE ONLY REASON YOU SAY THAT RACE WAS NOT AN ISSUE IS BECAUSE YOU WISH IT WAS NOT.
— CHIMAMANDA NGOZI ADICHIE

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FOUNDED BY

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BECAUSE THE TRUTH INVOLVES US ALL

It's a wage crisis

India's challenge is creating a complex ecosystem of high-productivity firms



MANISH SABHARWAL

THE DEBATE AROUND unemployment is unhelpful — since 1947, unemployment has bounced between 3-7 per cent of India's labour force. But reconciling this mathematical accuracy with our painful poverty — it has bounced between 25-75 per cent of our population since 1947, based on your definition of needs, wants and desires — needs an understanding of the "self-exploitation" theory proposed by the Russian economist Alexander Chayanov in the 1920s. He convinced Jawaharlal Nehru that small farms are viable because you don't have to pay yourself rent or pay a salary to yourself, spouse or kids. I make the case that one, self-exploitation — hanging out *vella* (idle) with low or zero marginal productivity in farms, self-employment or subsistence wage employment — has been India's labour market shock absorber since 1947. Two, this shock absorber no longer works because Indians born after 1991 expect a living wage (that meets aspirations) rather than a minimum wage (that keeps mind and body together). And three, these higher wage expectations can only be met by transitioning people to higher productivity sectors, geographies, and firms.

Our current debate confuses jobs with wages. Almost every Indian who wants a job has a job but they don't get the wages they want or need because they work in unviable sectors (48 per cent of our labour force on farms generates only 13 per cent of the GDP), unviable firms (our 6.3 crore enterprises only translate to 19,500 companies with a paid-up capital greater than Rs 10 crore), unviable entrepreneurship (50 per cent of our labour force is not self-employed but self-exploiting), and unviable geographies (2 lakh of our 6 lakh villages have less than 200 people).

Historian Ramachandra Guha reminds us that India may not yet be the most important or powerful country in the world but it is surely the most interesting. Our political parties have created the world's largest democracy on the infertile soil of the world's most hierarchical society. But we had zero chances of creating the world's largest economy on the infertile soil of the economic model articulated by the Avadi Resolution of

1955 and the Second Five Year plan of 1956. High wages need a complex ecosystem of high productivity firms and individuals: IT firms employ only 0.7 per cent of India's labour force but produce 7 per cent of India's GDP. A waiter in Chicago with skills similar to a waiter in Jaipur makes 20 times higher wages because of the productivity of the customers eating at the restaurant, and India's 20 million manufacturing SMEs have at least 25 times lower productivity than Germany's 200,000 *mittelstand* (SMEs).

Essentially, the GDP of 114 million Maharashtrais is more than 204 million people in Uttar Pradesh because Maharashtra is more formalised, industrialised, financialised, urbanised and skilled. Similarly, the GDP of 1.2 billion Indians till 2019 was lower than 66 million Britons because socialism — capitalism without competition and bankruptcy — led to nutty economics after 1947. Three books — *Capitalism in America; A History* by Alan Greenspan and Adrian Wooldridge, *How China Escaped the Poverty Trap* by Yuen Yuen Ang, and *Lost Glory; India's Capitalism Story* by Sumit Majumdar — talk about choices and consequences. America amplified prosperity (35 per cent of people in official poverty have air-conditioning and 60 per cent have a car), China has used markets to move 700 million people out of poverty since 1978, while our licence-radjed inefficiency. Politician Vasant Sathe pointed out in the 1980s that India's public sector steel industry employed 10 times more people to produce half the steel of South Koreans.

But India is breaking with its past. We have six million new registered enterprises after GST and 30 million new social security payers in three years. Our new monetary policy committee and fiscal discipline have blunted inflation from 8.33 per cent in 2014 to 2.19 per cent. Our new bankruptcy law has started recycling assets of Rs 14 lakh crore. In the 1960s, the-then RBI governor L K Jha had presciently warned that resource utilisation is as important as resource mobilisation. Digital payments have exploded from 0.1 million the month before demonetisation to 650

million last month. Infrastructure spending has doubled in the last five years accompanied by qualitative improvements in air connectivity, ports, highways and railways. Finally, a modern state is a welfare state with a broad tax base; India has more than a crore new individual tax filers since demonetisation with a 45 per cent increase in returns with incomes below Rs 10 lakh last year.

For India's 25th birthday in 1972, the late Sheila Dhar wrote a wonderful book, *This India* that suggested, "Indians have great patience. It is not in their nature to be in a hurry. They can wait longer, suffer more and work harder than other people." This paragraph would probably change for the 75th birthday version in 2022; the impatience of our young is changing India and her politics. And thankfully, our democracy means that the Chinese communist party strategy articulated in the 1980s — fill their stomachs but empty their minds — will not work in India. India's youth don't aspire to replace self-exploitation with the patronising pessimism of loan-write offs, subsidies or income without work; they recognise that a hard day's work in a formal job provides dignity, strength, identity and purpose in addition to living wages.

At a deeper level, our acceptance of self-exploitation was a form of mental bondage that defied Rabindranath Tagore's dream of our country becoming a place where the mind is without fear and the head is held high. In 1910, Tagore articulated this vision in 'Chitto Jetha Bhoyshunno' hoping his country would awake to a freedom where tireless striving stretches its arms to perfection. The end of our acceptance of self-exploitation embodies a freedom that would please the great sentinel. India's challenge is not jobs but employed poverty and while there is much unfinished work, it's delusional to believe we aren't making good progress. And it is unhelpful presentism to believe that policy-makers have no choice other than viewing our youth as petitioners rather than potential apprentices.

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THE NATION MOURNS

The killing of CRPF soldiers sears the nation with grief. This moment also calls for all to summon wisdom and foresight

THE VEHICLE-BOMB suicide attack on a CRPF convoy near Awantipora on Thursday is the deadliest ever terror strike against security forces in three decades of militancy in Kashmir. The loss of so many security personnel while on duty will be mourned across the country. Jaish-e-Mohammed, which works out of Pakistan under the leadership of Masood Azhar, has claimed responsibility for the attack. The Jaish has carried out other attacks in Kashmir in recent years, including the one at Uri and at Pathankot. Yet India's efforts to have Azhar designated as a global terrorist have been repeatedly blocked by China, a staunch ally of Pakistan. It is no wonder that both Beijing and Islamabad have been conspicuously silent as outrage has poured in from all over.

The route taken by the 78 vehicles with more than 2,500 jawans on Thursday is used by troop convoys travelling up from Jammu to camps in Srinagar. As it is the only highway, their movement is no secret. There have been attacks by militants on that road targeting troops and civilians in the past — returning Amarnath yatis were targeted in 2017 further south on the same highway — and for that reason, the road is heavily guarded. But as Thursday's attack has revealed, a bomber in a vehicle loaded with explosives just has to wait for his opportunity. Whether Jaish had advance information and how the bomber slipped through road opening parties that must clear and secure the route, is now a question for investigators to probe. For now, however, this moment calls for sobriety and wisdom. With parliamentary elections only weeks away, the timing of the attack is a fraught one. In BJP-dominated Jammu, a bandh has already been called for Friday. But the nation would be better served if the BJP-led NDA government at the Centre, and all political parties, including those in the Valley, pause and reflect on the grave juncture in Kashmir in which this devastating attack has come.

After years of near normalcy, the Amarnath land row crisis was the first turning point. Then, the 2015 re-emergence of militancy in the Valley took place in the backdrop of a general draining of optimism, with the hardening of the Centre's position on Kashmir and the worsening of relations with Pakistan, despite the initial hopes raised by the decision of the BJP and PDP to come together to form the government in 2014. This moment calls, therefore, for a sober look back, and ahead. Those who project militancy as the last resort of a betrayed people while claiming to speak for the interests of the Valley also need to reflect on how terrorism can delegitimise even a genuine political aspiration.

TWO ENDINGS

Lapsing of citizenship and triple talaq bills is welcome. Former should be buried, latter needs to be debated and finetuned

IT IS JUST as well that two contested pieces of legislation — the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill and the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Bill — have lapsed with the close of the Budget Session, the last parliamentary session of the 16th Lok Sabha. These bills had been passed in the Lower House and were awaiting introduction in the Rajya Sabha. Both had raised serious concerns that they would have a polarising effect, deepen ethnic, regional and communal fissures. Hopefully, the next government will make no attempt to revive the Citizenship (Amendment) Bill, and will make an effort to forge a greater consensus on the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Marriage) Bill, commonly referred to as the triple talaq bill, before seeking the approval of Parliament.

The proposed amendment to the Citizenship Act viewed Indian citizenship as an exclusive privilege of Indic faiths, excluded Muslims, and projected India as a homeland of Hindus. The NDA government shrugged off the criticism that the bill militated against the constitutional idea of Indian citizenship. It chose to ignore the ethnic faultlines in the Northeast and sought to impose a religious binary onto the complicated identity question that is central to politics in the region. The BJP's leader in the Northeast, Himanta Biswa Sarma, made his party's agenda clear when he reiterated on Wednesday that the BJP stands by the bill and that if it is not passed, as many as 17 constituencies in Assam "will go into the hands of Bangladeshi Muslims". This seems in stark contrast to the wider public opinion in the region. It is not surprising, then, that besides civil society groups like AASU, even chief ministers from the region have welcomed the lapsing of the citizenship bill. The BJP needs to understand that the identity question in the Northeast is a nuanced one and it must shun steps that may force open new faultlines. On the other hand, the triple talaq bill is a potentially progressive legislation that has faltered primarily because of the government's insistence on pressing the criminality clause, which has raised fears of a miscarriage of justice.

A lesson to be drawn from the 16th Lok Sabha, particularly the experience of these two bills, is that the party in power needs to engage creatively and persuasively with the Opposition. Consensus-building is a tough ask, but it is a task that is essential to the practice of democracy.

WHAT IS AMERICA?

Childish Gambino's song suggests disturbing answers. His winning the Grammy raises more questions

WHAT IS AMERICA? A superpower, of course, the mover of global capitalism. For some, the bearer of many inequalities and for others, it holds the dream of prosperity. But what is America for a black man? Donald Glover aka Childish Gambino's track, and the violent, absurd and chilling video that accompanies it, provide one answer to that question. And, with *This is America* becoming the first rap song to win the Grammy for both song and record of the year (2018), many are hailing the fact that "history has been made", that the mainstream is acknowledging the havoc that has been wrought on Black America's psyche by a history of violence and despair.

Throughout the video, Childish Gambino dances across frames that evoke a history of oppression: He is wearing trousers from the Confederate uniform (the pro-slavery camp in the US civil war), his posture mimics a famous Jim Crow poster, there are riots in the background while people film violence with their cellphones, a KKK member rides across. Gambino shoots a hooded black man, guns down a black church choir, all the while gleeful, dancing with children. What is this joy in the face of violence, this almost Kubrickesque pleasure in blood? *Dance and shake the frame/ We just wanna party (yeah)/ Party just for you (yeah)/ We just want the money (yeah)*. The black man, he seems to suggest, is distracted and appropriated, the occasional celebrity, the odd success story — and "the party" of consumerism, and violence keeps him in his place.

Childish Gambino did not perform in or even attend the Grammys. He has, since the release of the song, not spoken of its rich symbolism. The question, now, is this: How accurate is *This is America*? If the point Gambino appears to be making holds true, the honours he has received may even be seen as just another way to keep alive the nightmare that his song portrays. His dance has indeed "gotten him the money". But, and here there is hope, maybe it can help shake a country out of its slumber.

A REFEREE LESS PARTISAN

Blame for politicisation of the Speaker's office lies with the anti-defection law



CHAKSHU ROY

EARLIER THIS MONTH, the Speaker of the Karnataka Vidhan Sabha was embroiled in a controversy. The chief minister alleged that the Speaker was offered a bribe of Rs 50 crore. He played a tape which purportedly contains a conversation referring to money being offered to the Speaker for accepting the resignation of 15 MLAs. These allegations triggered a fresh political slugfest as any change in the number of MLAs in the Vidhan Sabha will destabilise the coalition government in Karnataka. The larger question this incident raises is of increasing politicisation of the office of the Speaker of legislatures.

Speakers are central to the functioning of a legislature. They are arbiters who steer proceedings in Parliament and state assemblies. They ensure that our legislative institutions fulfil their constitutional mandate of lawmaking, government accountability and representation. For Speakers to do their job effectively, insulation from political pressure is essential. The passing of the anti-defection law in 1985 gave Speakers the power to expel MLAs and MPs for anti-party activities, both inside and outside the legislature. This law single-handedly ensured that the Speaker, in addition to being a referee in legislative proceedings, also became an active player in the politics of government formation and survival.

Asoke Kumar Sen was the Union law minister who piloted the anti-defection law through Parliament. He reasoned that giving Speakers the power to expel legislators would prevent unnecessary delays by courts,

speed things up and give the law more teeth. Some MPs pointed out that this power would involve the Speaker in unnecessary controversies. However, Sen prevailed and the provision found its way into the Constitution. Perhaps he assumed that Speakers would remain immune to political pressures. It took less than three years for this assumption to be disproved. After the death of Tamil Nadu Chief Minister M G Ramachandran in 1987, the ensuing struggle for succession split the ruling AIADMK into two factions. His widow, V N Janaki, was sworn in as the CM. Thereafter, a confidence motion in her favour was moved in the assembly. During the voting, the party whip petitioned the Speaker asking for the disqualification of 27 MLAs from the opposing faction. The Speaker immediately disqualified these MLAs during voting in the House, which resulted in pandemonium. The Speaker's neutrality was questioned and aspersions cast on his decision. In 2017, Tamil Nadu faced a similar situation. The Speaker expelled certain MLAs for anti-party activities. The expelled MLAs, in their defence, alleged that the Speaker was acting with malice and bias. Another MLA described the Speaker's decision as a "murder of democracy". Over the last three decades, Speakers of Vidhan Sabhas have been criticised for decisions on the membership of MLAs under the anti-defection law and their rulings have been challenged in courts. Often, political pressure to give certain rulings, or not to act in certain cases, has led to the undermining of their constitutional office. There is an urgent need to protect the office of the Speaker from the ill effects of the anti-defection law.

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in certain cases, has led to the undermining of their constitutional office. There is an urgent need to protect the office of the Speaker from the ill effects of the anti-defection law. There is an easy and a hard way for this to be done.

The easy way is to either limit or take away the Speaker's powers when it comes to expelling legislators. This could be done by restricting the Speaker to only act against those legislators who defy the party whip while voting on matters that impact government stability. Or as some expert bodies have proposed, the Speaker's powers in such cases can be given to the President/Governor, acting on the advice of the Election Commission. The hard solution is to get rid of the anti-defection law. It is a law which is systematically hollowing out our legislatures. It has failed in achieving its purpose of political stability. Its provisions have been circumvented and it has stifled voices of our elected legislators.

Mahatma Gandhi, in 1931, observed that, "Democracy is a great institution and therefore it is liable to be greatly abused. The remedy, therefore, is not avoidance of democracy but reduction of the possibility of abuse to a minimum." The anti-defection law was passed in 1985 right after the 38th death anniversary of the Mahatma. It is time to get rid of the anti-defection law to prevent it from doing any further damage to the office of the Speaker.

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FEBRUARY 15, 1979, FORTY YEARS AGO

EMBASSY BESIEGED SCORES OF HEAVILY ARMED IRANIANS stormed the US embassy in downtown Teheran and briefly seized the compound after a prolonged gun-battle. US Ambassador William Sullivan ordered the embassy's 20 marine guards to cease resistance and to surrender with rest of the staff to the attackers. An American spokesman said the staff was free to leave but was remaining on the grounds for their own protection on the advice of Khomeini forces. But forces loyal to the religious leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, rushed to the rescue of more than 100 besieged Americans. Armed youths stood guard around the compound.

US ENVOY KILLED ADOLPH DUBS, THE US ambassador to Afghanistan, was killed after being kidnapped by unknown persons. The kidnappers brought Dubs to Kabul Hotel and held him there for three hours. Several of them were killed during a shootout with the police. Armed members of the Shiite sect kidnapped Dubs from his car and took him to the hotel, saying he would be freed only if their demand was met by the Afghan government. The demand was some recently Shiite mullahs should be released.

BHUTTO HANGING ZULFIKAR ALL BHUTTO won a reprieve from

imminent execution when the Pakistan Supreme Court agreed to undertake a final legal review of his conviction. The court granted his lawyers a stay of execution and fixed February 24 to start hearings on numerous legal questions and new evidence that the defence plans to bring. Without the stay, Bhutto could have been hanged tomorrow, his lawyers said, since the seven-day period for executive clemency appeals has expired. The stay of execution will run until the court disposes of the petition. In granting it, Chief Justice Anwar-ul-Haq said the court feels it has already spent too much time on the case and dislikes the idea of reopening material already covered during its seven-month hearing.