

A-Meri-India

A Note from the Land of Frustrated Aspirants

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Indian economy and society are facing a tumultuous start to the 21st century. Statistics may show record-breaking growth rates since 1991. Yet, the truth is that formal employment, especially in the corporate sector, has been stagnant, leading to mounting demands for caste-based reservation for government jobs. India is now, effectively, an outpost of global finance. We have preyed on our own culture and ecology, while the economy we chose to import hides our torn social fabric. Beneath the glitter that our politicians wish to plug is the ugly truth: cultural colonisation is at a historic peak, while we march confidently towards ecocide.

Winning is not everything. It is the only thing.

— American saying, attributed to
Vince Lombardi, American football coach
Dure (2015)

I expect either the United States singly or a combination of the United States and the British Commonwealth to re-establish and rejuvenate the foreign domination of India.

— Chaudhuri (1997: 58)

In the race that is “New India,” everyone can come first at the same time. How many Virat Kohlis can the Indian cricket team accommodate at most, at a time? The right answer: as many young, ambitious male cricketers as there are in India. This is the elementary takeaway for our youth from prime-time television. Do not let a trivial number like 11 stop you from reaching for the sky.

Picture a scene still very familiar from one of India’s rural roads. A train is expected to pass through a level crossing. Both sides of the level crossing are now packed with vehicles. The spaces on either side of the track resemble rival armies in battle formation. As soon as the train is in sight, almost in unison (as if responding to a battle call) engines are revved up. As soon as the train has passed, the barriers are lifted and the road reopens. Thus begins the war-of-way, an expected chaos wherein drivers from either side of the road try to outdo each other in making the crossing first.

Something like the chaos of this rail crossing is what appears to be happening to Indian economy and society in this tumultuous start to the 21st century. Possibly over a few hundred million working people, mostly young and

restless, are vying for jobs that are not even appearing in the tens of millions. However, such is the despairing fever of “aspirational India” that each of the hopefuls has been led to believe that they are among the “chosen ones” who will “one day” make the cut. Mass youth frustration is written deep into the script of the Indian reform-era economy, with tectonic implications for politics and society. If these are discussed at all in the media, euphemisms are deployed.

“Amerindia,” or “A-Meri-India,” is the name I have given to the country we now live in, given that our children and grandchildren are even more subject to American rule (via global corporate-controlled markets and cultural invasion) than our foreparents ever were subject to during British rule. Ironically, during the decades since independence, psychological colonisation has only intensified (especially during 1985–91), instead of getting attenuated, with time.

Some data from the Government of India’s *Economic Survey* will illustrate the point about frustrated aspirations with stark clarity. The taxpaying formal (organised) sector, home to the most coveted jobs in the economy, accounts for well under 7% of all jobs; a fact of enduring obstinacy remarkable in itself. Over 93% of jobs are in “informal” occupations like construction, domestic work, street-hawking, and farming. Despite record-breaking growth rates since 1991, especially since 2003, formal employment in India’s organised sector has been resiliently stagnant, rising imperceptibly from 26.7 million in 1991 to just under 30 million after almost a quarter century of growth.

If we account for the fact that government and public sector jobs have declined (due to mechanisation and divestment) from 19 million to just under 18 million, it turns out that the private corporate sector has generated a net increase of formal employment for about 4 million workers. This has happened over a period during

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which the total workforce has increased by over 200 million! Even if we charitably assume that chain-multiplier effects generated by growth in the organised sector have implications for employment in the unorganised sector, and make a liberal assumption that 10 jobs in the unorganised economy result for every job generated in the organised mainstream economy, the sum total of the contribution made by the private corporate sector to the generation of jobs across the country over a period of 25 years is 44 million; well under a quarter of the asking rate (Ministry of Finance 2016).¹

It Pays To Be ‘Backward’

Few have even discussed at length the fundamental difference between jobs and livelihoods. Nor is there an attempt to relate the failure of the private sector to generate jobs to the rising demand for reservations in public sector and government jobs around the country. Most analyses have stayed shy of pointing to the impossibility of aspirations (a word that entered public “development” discourse only in the 21st century, thanks to the marketing divisions of the megacorps) and of seeing the critical importance of the phenomenon of land-based caste power getting overtaken in rural India by lower landless castes who gain a measure of social mobility through market opportunities or, more commonly, through government jobs reserved for them.

For all the hoopla made about the imperative for economic growth in order to generate jobs, the data reveals that most of the growth has been job-destroying (millions have been laid off over the years since 1991), just like it has been in China and much of the rest of the world. Given rapidly automating technology, the outlook for the future, both short- and long-term, is equally bleak (ILO 2016).

The drying up of jobs in the mainstream corporate-led economy means that there is suddenly far greater demand for government positions and for caste-based reservations for such jobs. When I met Bihar Chief Minister Nitish Kumar on the eve of the assembly elections in November 2015, he told me that, on average, some 2–3 lakh people apply for 2,000 positions in the Bihar government. (He took some satisfaction in the fact that in

Gujarat the ratio of applicants to jobs is two to three times higher!)

In Uttar Pradesh, stories have been recorded of the struggle for government jobs for sweepers, wherein many college graduates have been known to apply. Again, the ratio of applicants to the number of jobs was in the range of 100:1. Local Dalits were so disconcerted by this that they asked for reservation of sweeper jobs for themselves.

There is an incentive for every caste, no matter how high up in the traditional hierarchy, to get classified as “backward” in order to secure preference in reservations. The Jat agitation in Haryana has already taken many lives. The same is true of the Patidar *andolan* in Gujarat. Kapus in Andhra Pradesh, Marathas in Maharashtra, Gujjars in Rajasthan, and Ahoms in Assam are all also asking for the same thing: quotas for their community.

These landowning OBCs (or those belonging to the “Other Backward Classes”) have been traditionally powerful in rural India. They have derived benefits from the fact that the government abolished agricultural and land taxation after independence. They have also taken advantage of free or highly subsidised electricity, fertilisers and canal irrigation.

However, economic growth in the reform era has generated a new middle class that has reduced the hold of the traditional landowning castes. Many Patidars, Kapus and others have seized the opportunities of the new economy and done well for themselves. But, many more have been left behind, surpassed by an aspirant class that often includes lower castes who have taken advantage of reservations in education and jobs. Sweepers employed by the government may be from the lower castes, but they are earning more than many of the landowning castes above them in the traditional hierarchy.

India’s political leaders and policymakers have been arguing for years that farmers should leave agriculture since there is no money in it, and move to more “productive” occupations. (The money magically reappears in agriculture, of course, when global agribusiness corporations enter it.) Under the tutelage of international financial institutions, the economics of agriculture has been rendered adverse

over a period of time to induce farmers to quit farming. This has made way for food multinationals and facilitated land acquisition for real estate, infrastructure, mining and industry. Should we be surprised then that in the last two decades the country has witnessed the fact that 3.5 lakh people who chose to stick to agriculture committed suicide?²

The promise being made to the millions, especially the youth leaving farming households, is of industrial and service jobs in the cities, of a place in the metropolitan economy of the country, and of global lifestyles. This promise is far from being met. However, it exists as a real fantasy in the minds of millions of young Indians.

It was a young and desperate India that voted for a man desperate to become Prime Minister of the country two years ago. The flood tide of support from urban and urbanising youth, which was crucial in bringing Narendra Modi and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) to office, is more than likely to turn against him in 2019, unless he achieves the impossible and in fact delivers the promised jobs.

The data is not on his side.

India 2041

Let us conduct a thought experiment and examine what would have to become true if every Indian finance minister’s dream for India (and it is fundamentally the same development dream for all of them: an Indian edition of the American dream) were to be realised in the next quarter century; as many years into the future as it has taken for India to get here from the 1991 reforms. The dream is for India to become a fully “developed” powerful modern nation.

To spell it out precisely, not only would poverty have become a thing of the distant past by 2041, and prosperity and well-being the general norm, some 75%–80% of India’s population of 1.6 billion, which is to say some 1.2–1.28 billion people (the entire population of India at the moment) will find itself living in cities. Finance ministers in both Congress-led United Progressive Alliance as well as BJP-led National Democratic Alliance governments have shared this hope.³

What would this mean in concrete terms? In urban and metropolitan India, it would mean that a miraculous 200 million

additional jobs will be created in the next quarter century, at the rate of 25 million new jobs every year. As pointed out earlier, we are already an order of magnitude behind the asking rate of job creation for the rapidly growing workforce since 1991. It would also mean that our cities are suddenly able to provide the enormous infrastructure—of clean air and water, sanitation and power, roads and communication, housing and security—for some 800 million more people! Smart cities, anyone?

In the countryside, such a vision entails equally heroic achievements. If over three-quarters of India is to be urban by 2041, and villagers have been dissuaded from agriculture, it will be a profound epistemic break from the past, the like of which has never happened in India's history: a whole generation of young Indians would have been reared without any knowledge of manual agriculture. This has the widest imaginable implications. Consider just a few:

(i) It would mean that agriculture would be virtually fully mechanised, as in the “developed” world. To fire the threshers, combine harvesters, and other agricultural machinery would make gargantuan demands on energy resources. Even if only half the energy is drawn from fossil fuels (itself a heroic ask), it would make the most severe demands on the world's remaining oil and coal reserves, in an era dominated by peak oil, and approaching “peak coal.” Where will these fossil fuels come from? A good fraction will have to be imported with increasingly scarce foreign exchange reserves, provided countries are still as willing to sell these fuels.

(ii) It could be argued that India, now a wealthy country, will import food. Again, the scarcity of foreign exchange might be the operative constraint. It is worth keeping in view that India's exports have been declining steadily for a year and a half at the time of writing, and we have had only two years of trade surplus during the last four decades! One must also reckon with the prospect of bartering away the foundations of our food security to nations who will presumably sell us food or the fuel to grow it.

Even if India finds the foreign exchange in 2041, will there be countries left on earth willing and able to supply food for,

possibly, over half a billion people? Is there an agro-ecological substitute for the Indo-Gangetic plains on earth?

(iii) Finally, one would have to consider the fact that this level of fossil-fuel-driven agriculture would make extraordinary demands on climate space precisely in an era when the latter will be shrinking virtually exponentially. Compared to early developers, India's industrialisation is taking place in vastly altered conditions, inhibiting modernisation. The shortfall of resources (both inputs as well as pollution and climate space, saturation of global markets (in terms of effective demand), industrial automation/robotisation, limited but precise skill requirements in 21st century industry and services (making many in the aspirant class effectively unemployable, as is the refrain from so many corporations), and the political constraint of a democracy are only the tip of the iceberg.

So far as we have been able to ascertain, India is the only instance in all of history of a country of significant size trying to industrialise, modernise and urbanise under conditions of universal adult franchise, making the forcible movement of large human populations very difficult. Suffice it to say that the only adjective such a “developmentalist” vision merits is “absurd.” Will capitalism and development be the next victims of the interrogation done by Indian democracy?⁴

Have, Have-nots, Have-lots

It would be folly to assume that an Indian Rockefeller would be better than the American Rockefeller. Impoverished India can become free, but it will be hard for any India made rich through immorality to regain its freedom ... money renders a man helpless.

— Gandhi (2010: 89)

One reason India is in such a sorry ecological, cultural, economic and political mess today is because of our near-total intellectual failure to grasp the big picture of things as they have been unfolding for a generation. Today, a drive from the airport of any major Indian city to the city centre is likely to reveal the open secret of the Indian “developmental” vision to an attentive observer. This is what one may justly call “the developer's view” of development. Unlikely to ever meet the pages of a development textbook, such a

vision is all about luxury living in every conceivable dimension. Billboards advertise homes in apartment complexes with tag lines free of irony, like: “an epitome of beauty, serenity and colonial charm,” “Venice in Greater Noida,” “Golf and live in paradise,” and so on.

By no means are these idle fantasies. For three-dimensional proof one only need be familiar with some of the quite ordinarily luxurious new homes in Palm Meadows in Bengaluru or Cleo County in Noida.

Behind these “developments” are some of the most powerful and politically influential people in the country: property dealers, land speculators, realtors, builders, developers; the men whose Audis, BMWs and Jaguars race on our city streets. Often such people double up as politicians themselves, representing their constituencies in state assemblies and Parliament. India is the haven of political entrepreneurship in the 21st century.

It is this model of “development”—which structurally excludes the vast majority of Indians, and which entirely reinforces and is founded on colonial premises—that will increasingly be questioned by the frustrated aspirants to “New India.” The haves (even more than the have-nots who have been beaten into the earth) are seeking their share of the creamy pie which, so far, has been restricted preponderantly to the have-lots.⁵

Marching towards Ecocide?

If the reigning plank of policies persists for another generation, the ecological dismemberment of the subcontinent is a foregone conclusion; the floods, fires, and droughts of recent summers being early warning signals of times to come. It is necessary to state that the agro-ecological basis of this civilisation is now in mortal peril. In a little-noticed tract on the Visva-Bharati University, written almost a century ago, Rabindranath Tagore (2004: 75–76) wrote:

before Asia is in a position to co-operate with the culture of Europe, she must base her own structure on a synthesis of all the different cultures which she has. When, taking her stand on such a culture, she turns toward the West, she will take, with a confident sense of mental freedom, her own view of truth, from her own vantage-ground, and open a new vista of thought to the world. *Otherwise,*

she will allow her priceless inheritance to crumble into dust, and, trying to replace it clumsily with feeble imitations of the West, make herself superfluous, cheap and ludicrous. If she thus loses her individuality and her specific power to exist, will it in the least help the rest of the world? Will not her terrible bankruptcy involve also the Western mind? If the whole world grows at last into an exaggerated West, then such an illimitable parody of the modern age will die, crushed beneath its own absurdity [emphasis added].

I believe it is extremely important to invoke such writers of unimpeachable integrity as Nirad Chandra Chaudhuri, Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, who will hold us to vital values in the recession nowadays. It scarcely bears mention that the timely warning issued by them went, and still goes, remarkably unheeded by their countrymen, especially its so-called educated elites. We have now created a country that has more “Americans” living in it than are to be found in the land they take inspiration from.

In trying to meet the impossible promise of letting a million new people enter, mentally, the globalised metropolitan economy every month from the ranks of aspirational India—selling them the sky itself in order to carry on with a vaingloriously triumphant business-as-usual attitude—our leaders are not only showing a dismal absence of imagination (especially indigenous imagination), they are in fact radically transforming Indian society and culture for the worse. Mimicking the patterns of the “mother country,” we have now before us a winner-takes-all economy, led by young and virile role models like Virat Kohli and Kangana Ranaut; the erotic innuendos never coincidental in a world cognitively dominated by the messaging of 24/7/365 aggressive marketing. Society and culture are but forms of collateral damage to such an invasive economy.

Much violence is to come on account of this culturally corrosive historical process unfolding before us, threatening the constitutional polity of the country like never before. India was never more psychologically colonised than it is today. Even as a thoroughly specious and vainglorious variety of corporate “nationalism” is on show, people’s patriotic credentials are under unprecedented scrutiny by those who continue to betray the heritage of the land through systematic

persistence and reinforcement of the policies of their predecessors, claiming monopoly on the legacy of India’s cultures.⁶

Never was the country ruled more by non-resident Indians (NRIs) and resident non-Indians (RNIs) than it is today. For, make no mistake, Modi’s rapidly digitising India is but an upgraded version of the dream of one of his predecessors; a comparison with whom, given his political rhetoric, would surely embarrass him. Let us remind ourselves that we now live in Rajiv Gandhi’s utopia. Did he not, after his electoral victory by a record margin in 1985, deploy the slogan that he would be “taking India into the 21st century” on the wings of information technology? He would be surely delighted to learn today that information technology now rules the fantasy-filled Indian imagination, as it does the imagination of few other cultures or polities.

This is an era of nested eras. Long periods of history that began decades, sometimes centuries, ago are converging into a climax in these turbulent decades of the 21st century. In this “longue durée” perspective, the following dates are critical: 1492 (Columbian voyage to “India”), 1600 (founding of the East India Company), 1757 (the decisive Battle of Plassey and the beginning of Company rule in Bengal), 1857 (the inauguration of British Crown rule in India), 1947 (formal Indian independence), 1985–91 (the birth of A-Meri-India/Amerindia, following Rajiv Gandhi’s tech-push and the International Monetary Fund-led reforms beginning June 1991).

India is now a proud outpost of global finance, preying faster every day on its own culture and ecology, even as the imported economy (true to former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher’s dismissal of the very notion of society) has all but eclipsed human society itself, apart from failing to redeem the jobs promise.

One can only hope and pray that the cultural confidence of our civilisation will revive, as Tagore had hoped, soon enough to not only protect India from the worst socio-ecological damages of breakneck globalisation, but also play the role of the world’s ecological pioneer, instead of the “superpower” it has somehow come to believe it is destined to become one day

(swallowing perhaps a canard started by Wall Street). India has now become an embarrassing case of voluntary colonialism. It is for India to bring this to a final end and recover the authentic currents of its ancient civilisation.⁷

NOTES

- 1 For a detailed analysis of the data on lay-offs and retrenchments, see Aseem Shrivastava and Ashish Kothari (2014), Chapters 2 and 3.
- 2 For a detailed analysis, see Shrivastava and Kothari (2014), Chapters 6 and 7.
- 3 See, for instance, Congress Finance Minister P Chidambaram’s view as expressed in an interview (Ray and Chaudhury 2008). Needless to add, the National Democratic Alliance’s Finance Minister Arun Jaitley does not believe in a different vision of India’s future.
- 4 A populist, modernising, “developing” democracy finds itself unable to articulate in the public domain that the developmental project, certainly as currently conceived, is in fact an impossibility. A senior retired professor from the University of Delhi, a brilliant maverick, is said to have opined that if someone had a good theory, they should bring it to India, and we would test it out for them. We did a pretty thorough job on socialism. We are busy these days doing an equally impressive interrogation of democracy. It remains for development (read capitalism) to pass what one might call—with qualified pride—“The Indian test.” Needless to add, the odds are well-stacked against the theory, for all the reasons discussed above.
- 5 See Chapters 6 and 7 of Shrivastava and Kothari (2014), for an analysis of India’s internal colonialism.
- 6 For an elaboration of the oxymoronic concept of “corporate nationalism,” please see Shrivastava and Kothari (2014), Chapter 11.
- 7 For an alternative vision for India’s economy/ecology, interested readers are directed to see Shrivastava and Kothari (2014), Part II, and also await the publication of my paper with Elango Rangasamy “Localization and Regionalization of Economies: A Preliminary Sketch for an Ecological Imperative” in a forthcoming volume titled *Alternatives*, edited by Ashish Kothari and K J Joy.

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