

About dignity

Bonanzas under the Seventh Pay Commission Recommendations are being distributed. The lucky ones are getting luckier, if not happier. We see them; for they have a knack of remaining visible and audible. It takes no greatness, Gandhiji would say, to see them or hear their clamour. What proves who we are is whether or not we have eyes to see those who otherwise go unseen. Gandhi called them God's people, Harijan, because only God sees their misery. God is the only refuge for those who are unwanted by all else.

Maybe it is not our blindness but our cowardice. We lack the gumption to look at the 500-odd million of our fellow Indians who languish in what is euphemistically called the "unorganised sector". It is not that we don't want them to eat two square meals a day. But if they do, the abundance on our banquet tables could be compromised. Will we be able to graduate from mid-segment cars to their luxury variants, if the needs of these lesser mortals are hitched on to "India Shining"? Will we imperil our dreams by providing for the bottom-line needs of our work-force, and opening the doors of the future to their children?

Euphemisms are like Madame Tussaud's wax models — they are fixed and formulated in waxen serenity. They showcase a world sans hunger and deprivation, common cold and untold suffering. So, let's ask, "What, for God's sake, is this 'unorganised sector'?"

Strange, it is made up of human beings. "Sector" could make you think otherwise. A disconcertingly large portion of our fellow citizens remains forever vulnerable to the vagaries of unemployment, exploitation, insecurity, poverty, social degradation, cultural exclusion and developmental disenfranchisement within the ambit of this sanitised expression. This "sector", by the way, is wholly human-made, though we have come to think of it as willed by fate. The lesser mortals who inhabit this no-man's land are capable of improvement, given a ghost of a chance. This should be so because they contribute 45 per cent of the wealth of our country — though we think of them as a national liability.

Look closer, if you don't mind, to the "Pay Commission". How easily we forget, in the massive consultations and microscopic fine-tuning of pay revisions in our country, that "wage" needs to be deemed as honourable and dignified as "pay" is, in a society with even a rudimentary notion of justice and fair-play. Salaries have undergone astronomical enhancements in our country. Government and private sector salaries have gone through the roof, while corporate emoluments have shot right through the sky. Wages remain, in real terms, where we left them before we began our growth story.

Wages, let us say, of the so-called "unskilled workers" vary wildly from Rs 850 per day in Kerala to a third of it in most other parts of the country. How any work done by anyone can be insulted as "unskilled" is a question that we rarely ask. Skill is involved in sweeping the floor, washing utensils, baking bricks or working in quarries. Only those who have done no manual work will continue to harbour the insensitivity of belittling the "skill" involved in doing any kind of work. Since Prime Minister [Narendra Modi](#)'s Swachh Bharat Abhiyan forced soft and delicate hands to wield brooms — with what order of skills and to what effect we know — this argument need not be pressed any further.

We did hope when the PM announced his Clean India Mission, that valuing and adequately rewarding the vast army of wage-earners in India would be its most significant spin-off. PM Modi, on his part, did speak knowledgeably on the nexus between hygiene and health, with particular reference to the poor. It cannot be that the PM does not know the connection between our poverty and the systemic injustice done to those bracketed in the "un-organised" sector. Surely, health and

hygiene make no sense in the dens of destitution. It is our hope that the PM will turn his attention to bringing a modicum of justice to the long-neglected and much-wronged “unorganised sector”. Our main hope in this regard is the political acumen of the PM. He knows how grateful the poor are — or, for that matter, that only the poor are grateful.

We, therefore, await the PM to take bold steps to evolve a national and rational minimum wage policy.

What is “rational” involves a standardisation of sorts. The counterpart to those maligned as “unskilled” labour in the unorganised sector are, say, the peons/attendants in the organised sector. In the wake of the Seventh Pay Commission, they will carry home monthly salaries in excess of Rs 25,000 per month, besides enjoying 30 years of assured employment and other benefits, including medical reimbursement and life-long retirement benefits. We insult ourselves if we recompense the back-breaking, daylong work done by our fellow citizens below this level. Such a policy needs to be given effect urgently as it has a bearing on the education and health of millions of our children who, otherwise, are blighted by malnutrition and illiteracy. The correlation between the sub-human conditions under which workers in the unorganised sector live and school drop-out rates of their children is too well-known to need any argument.

We make this appeal not only to the government but also to our fellow citizens. Rather than relish the fleeting euphoria of hikes in incomes, it behooves us to embrace a voluntary salary freeze for a period, until minimum justice is done to those who toil and sweat to make the wheels of development move in this land. As the Father of the Nation said — with a larger frame of reference — we have enough to meet everyone’s needs, but not enough to quench anyone’s greed.

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