

LAND OF THE UNFREE: ON U.S. UNREST

America is in great need of legislative reform that supports a pluralist ethos

If ever there were a doubt that racism in the U.S. had outlived eight years under former President Barack Obama, the events of this week, including protests following the death of an African-American, George Floyd, in police action in Minneapolis, Minnesota, have set them to rest. Even as rallies and police crackdowns engulfed a wide swathe of American metros, President Donald Trump inserted himself into the controversy and triggered a broader debate on censorship of posts by social media platforms. On Friday, Twitter masked and attached a caution note to a tweet by Mr. Trump for “glorifying violence”. In that tweet he had labelled protesters calling for action against police for Floyd’s death “THUGS”, adding “when the looting starts, the shooting starts”, a reference to a threat by a police chief, who in 1967 declared “war” and vowed violent revenge on African-Americans in Miami Beach. As outrage spread across social media, Mr. Trump appeared to dial down his rhetoric subsequently, tweeting, “It was spoken as a fact, not as a statement.” This is hardly the first time that the U.S. President has fanned the flames of hatred. He has said, among other things, that Mexicans were rapists and drug dealers, and in early 2017 he banned visitors from certain Muslim-majority countries.

It is almost inevitable that racial tensions will bubble to the surface in an election year and explode when incendiary remarks are made by leaders. Amid such a toxic public discourse, fuelled by a Republican Commander-in-Chief, hope for a more reasonable, tolerant and bipartisan approach rests on the shoulders of Joe Biden, the presumptive Democratic Party nominee. Should Mr. Biden select an African-American or a minority community leader as his running mate, the base of potential voters could broaden and help improve the Democrats’ odds of taking back the White House. The potential candidates for this role include California Senator Kamala Harris and Representative Maxine Waters, former National Security Adviser Susan Rice, not to mention former First Lady Michelle Obama. However, the mere tokenism of including persons of colour as a vice-presidential candidate or in a potential Biden cabinet of 2021 will not suffice to heal the painful fractures in American society, riven by hateful rhetoric on race. The balm must include far-reaching legislative reform on the use of excessive force by police against minorities, punishment for all hate crimes, workplace discrimination, and inhumane treatment of migrants at the border. Unless such an agenda, focused on the complete reform of government institutions toward supporting a pluralist ethos, is adopted by the next occupant of the White House, the American dream will remain a mirage for many.

Meanings of Difficult Words :

- ❖ **unfree** (adjective) – restricted, confined, cornered (without freedom).
- ❖ **unrest** (noun) – disruption, turmoil, chaos, agitation.
- ❖ **legislative/law reform** (adjective) – the legislative process of examining existing laws, and advocating (recommending) and implementing change in a legal system, usually with the aim of enhancing justice or efficiency.
- ❖ **pluralist** (adjective) – coexisting; relating to (the people) exist in harmony irrespective of various differences.
- ❖ **ethos** (noun) – ethics/beliefs, principles, standards.
- ❖ **outlive** (verb) – survive, outlast, withstand.
- ❖ **set something at rest** (phrase) – to conclude or end something.
- ❖ **crackdown** (noun) – getting tough, severe/stern measures, restriction, suppression/repression, clampdown.
- ❖ **engulf** (verb) – overwhelm, inundate, swamp, overtake, affect powerfully.
- ❖ **swathe** (noun) – a wide area (of something).

- ❖ **trigger** (verb) – give rise to, cause, invoke, bring about.
- ❖ **mask** (verb) – conceal, hide, screen something (from view).
- ❖ **glorifying** (adjective) – promoting, praising, applauding, admiring (an unimportant thing excessively by describing it as a better one).
- ❖ **thug** (noun) – a criminal, violent person, hooligan, vandal.
- ❖ **loot** (verb) – steal (goods from a place).
- ❖ **vow** (verb) – affirm, pledge, promise/swear, make a commitment.
- ❖ **revenge** (noun) – vengeance, retribution, retaliation.
- ❖ **outrage** (noun) – indignation, fury, anger, wrath, resentment.
- ❖ **dial down** (phrasal verb) – reduce, lessen, decrease (the intensity of something).
- ❖ **rhetoric** (noun) – the art of speaking or writing effectively & persuasively or impressively (but, often lacking substance); bombast, loftiness, hyperbole/extravagant language.
- ❖ **subsequently** (adverb) – afterwards, later on, eventually.
- ❖ **hardly** (adverb) – almost not, never.
- ❖ **fan the flames** (phrase) – increase feelings/emotions.
- ❖ **hatred** (noun) – hate, hostility, resentment, dislike/bitterness.
- ❖ **inevitable** (adjective) – unavoidable, unpreventable, bound to happen.
- ❖ **bubble** (verb) – emerge, appear, raise, increase, become obvious.
- ❖ **explode** (verb) – burst, erupt, blow up, trigger off.
- ❖ **incendiary** (adjective) – inflammatory, provocative, agitational, arousing, controversial.
- ❖ **amid** (preposition) – in the middle of, surrounded by; during.
- ❖ **toxic** (adjective) – dangerous, destructive, harmful.
- ❖ **discourse** (noun) – talk, communication, expression.
- ❖ **fuel** (verb) – stimulate, encourage, intensify (an emotion).
- ❖ **tolerant** (adjective) – unprejudiced, unbiased, liberal; lenient, broad-minded, sympathetic, understanding.
- ❖ **bipartisan** (adjective) – involving cooperation between two (opposite & big) political parties.
- ❖ **rest on someone's shoulders** (phrase) – to become someone's responsibility.
- ❖ **presumptive nominee** (noun) – In United States presidential elections, the presumptive nominee is a presidential candidate who is assumed to be their party's nominee, but has not yet been formally.
- ❖ **running mate** (noun) – the person who runs with someone in an election (such as an election to choose a new president) and who is given the less important position (such as vice president) if they are elected (Courtesy: VOA Learning English).
- ❖ **base** (noun) – a group of people (considered as supporting a person/organisation).
- ❖ **potential** (adjective) – possible, likely, probable.
- ❖ **broaden** (verb) – expand, enlarge, extend.
- ❖ **odds** (noun) – (difficult/tough) probability, chances, conditions.
- ❖ **take back** (phrasal verb) – occupy a place; take hold of.
- ❖ **not to mention** (phrase) – in addition to, as well as.
- ❖ **mere** (adjective) – just, only.
- ❖ **tokenism** (noun) – the practice or policy of making symbolic efforts to impress (minority) people and the people to think that the organisation is dealing with problems fairly but actually it is not.
- ❖ **person of colour** (noun) – it is primarily used in the United States to describe any person who is not considered white.
- ❖ **suffice** (verb) – be enough, be sufficient, be adequate.
- ❖ **fracture** (noun) – fragmentation, breaking, rupture, disintegration.
- ❖ **rive** (verb) – tear apart, split apart, rip apart, rupture/disrupt/sever.
- ❖ **balm** (noun) – relief, comfort, consolation, cheer.
- ❖ **far-reaching** (adjective) – radical, all-embracing, sweeping; important, major, significant.

- ❖ **hate crime** (noun) – any criminal offence that is carried out because of hostility or prejudice based on disability, race, religion, transgender identity or sexual orientation.
- ❖ **discrimination** (noun) – prejudice, intolerance, inequity, unfairness (against an individual or group of individuals by society and its institutions (basically in the procedures, policies or objectives) as a whole.
- ❖ **inhumane** (adjective) – vicious/cruel, brutal, barbaric.
- ❖ **occupant** (noun) – incumbent, holder.
- ❖ **mirage** (noun) – an unrealistic hope/wish; misconception/delusion.

WORKFORCE HABITS: ON TWEAKING OF LABOUR LAWS

Instead of tweaking labour laws, States must inspire confidence in workers

Over two months into the national lockdown, India's workforce, ostensibly blessed to be part of its much-vaunted demographic dividend, is in complete disarray. There is the visibly disturbing narrative of a few million workers trying to get back home from their respective urban lives as resources run out and lack of adequate living space hits hard in the face of a virus that requires physical distancing. They used their feet, often facing police wrath, till the administration allowed trains and buses to move again. While swathes of informal sector workers are moving away from their adopted base, the remaining 10% of the workforce that is formally employed with social security benefits are beset by pink slips, furloughs, or salary cuts. The trend, driven by the slump in economic activity, cuts across sectors. Restrictions have eased slightly, but a return to normalcy has proved challenging even for the firms that are allowed to operate, largely due to inadequate manpower. Industry representatives have pleaded with the Labour Ministry to cajole workers to return to their workplaces on being summoned, and if that does not prove effective, make them liable for action under relevant industrial labour legislation. Relaxations have also been sought in statutory wage payments for April and May when little work happened.

Several States offered a temporary fix — stretching permissible working hours from eight to 12, so that productivity can improve even with less-than-optimal staff strength. While Rajasthan withdrew such an order, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and some others have used the occasion to embark on a purge of labour laws, citing the need to spur investor confidence and revive job creation. Labour unions have protested this wholesale scrapping that would leave employees vulnerable in many aspects. Being a concurrent subject in the Constitution, States, however, need the Centre's nod to effect these changes and, for now, Labour Minister Santosh Kumar Gangwar appears disinclined to agree. Official instructions to keep paying employees amidst the lockdown have not worked evenly, while tweaks such as lowering the EPF contribution rate do not amount to much relief for firms or their staff. While the nature of work is changing and greater spending is needed on hygiene, the immediate challenge is to inspire employee confidence. Most migrant workers are running scared of the pandemic. Getting them home safely is a first step and giving them an emergency income support till the worst of the pandemic subsides is the next. But for them to return to work enthusiastically over time, it is equally critical to reorient India's current approach to urban and industrial housing, workplace social security and minimum wage standards. The Centre must begin a dialogue with States on this front. Ineffective paper laws such as the Inter-State Migrant Workmen Act of 1979 can be reviewed thereafter.

Meanings of Difficult Words :

- ❖ **workforce** (noun) – workers, employees.
- ❖ **tweak** (verb) – adjust, modify, alter.

- ❖ **habit** (noun) – rule, norm, convention, practice, custom, policy.
- ❖ **visibly** (adverb) – clearly, noticeably.
- ❖ **inspire** (verb) – motivate, cause, persuade, encourage.
- ❖ **lockdown** (noun) – an emergency protocol implemented by the authorities that prevents people from leaving from a place; An extended state of confinement/encirclement/isolation of a person by the authority.
- ❖ **ostensibly** (adverb) – apparently, seemingly, allegedly, supposedly.
- ❖ **much-vaunted** (adjective) – much-acclaimed, much-celebrated, much-admired, much-praised.
- ❖ **demographic dividend** (noun) – it is defined as a boost in economic productivity that occurs when there are growing numbers of people in the workforce relative to the number of dependents (or) it is the accelerated development that can arise when a population has a relatively large proportion of working-age people coupled with effective human capital investment. A term used to describe the period when a greater proportion of the population of a country is young and in the working age-group. It indicates increase in growth as a result of higher proportion of working age people in the total population of a country.
- ❖ **disarray** (noun) – disorder, confusion, disorganization.
- ❖ **narrative** (noun) – a representation of a particular situation; portrayal/ account.
- ❖ **lives** (noun) – plural form of life.
- ❖ **run out** (phrasal verb) – be exhausted, be finished, be used up, consume.
- ❖ **lack of** (noun) – absence, deficiency, unavailability, fall short of.
- ❖ **living space** (noun) – the amount of space required by people to live in.
- ❖ **in the face of** (phrase) – when confronted/faced with.
- ❖ **social/physical distancing** (noun) – a term means actively avoiding crowded public places, is a key element in decreasing the rapid spread of COVID-19. This is an effort intended to limit exposure by reducing face-to-face contact and preventing spread among people in community settings.
- ❖ **wrath** (noun) – anger/fury, indignation; vexation, annoyance.
- ❖ **swathe** (noun) – a wide area (of something).
- ❖ **informal sector** (noun) – informal economy, grey economy is the part of an economy that is neither taxed, nor monitored by any form of government.
- ❖ **base** (noun) – the place where a person works/lives in.
- ❖ **social security (scheme/benefit)** (noun) – (In India) social security schemes/benefits cover these (Pension, Health Insurance and Medical Benefit, Disability Benefit, Maternity Benefit, Gratuity) social insurances. The employers in the organized sector are entitled to coverage under these social security schemes. A large number of the Indian workers in the unorganized/informal sector may not have an opportunity to participate in each of these schemes.
- ❖ **beset** (verb) – trouble, bother, embarrass (persistently).
- ❖ **pink slip** (noun) – the termination notice (or notice of dismissal) issued by employer to employee.
- ❖ **furlough** (noun) – a mandatory suspension from (time off) work for employees, typically without pay; involuntary break/temporary leave (without pay).
- ❖ **slump** (noun) – decline, tumble, drop, steep fall.
- ❖ **cut across** (phrasal verb) – have an effect (in spite of boundaries); transcend, go beyond, rise above.
- ❖ **normalcy** (noun) – a normal condition; normality, regularity.
- ❖ **plead** (verb) – appeal to, beseech, request/ask earnestly.
- ❖ **cajole** (verb) – persuade, tempt, coax; butter up, sweat talk.
- ❖ **summon** (verb) – call for, ask for, request (the presence of).
- ❖ **liable** (adjective) – responsible, answerable, accountable.

- ❖ **legislation** (noun) – statute, act, bill, law.
- ❖ **relaxation** (noun) – moderation, modification (of a rule less strict).
- ❖ **seek** (verb) – ask for, request, appeal for, solicit.
- ❖ **statutory** (adjective) – legitimate, acceptable, permissible/admissible.
- ❖ **fix** (noun) – solution, answer, remedy.
- ❖ **stretch** (verb) – extend, lengthen, prolong.
- ❖ **optimal** (adjective) – optimum, ideal, perfect.
- ❖ **occasion** (noun) – (a particular) time, moment, point.
- ❖ **embark on** (phrasal verb) – start, begin, initiate/commence.
- ❖ **purge** (noun) – clear-out, removal, dismissal, ousting.
- ❖ **spur** (verb) – stimulate, encourage, motivate.
- ❖ **revive** (verb) – revitalize, regenerate, restore, bring back.
- ❖ **wholesale** (adjective) – extensive, total, complete, sweeping.
- ❖ **scrap** (verb) – remove, get rid of, eliminate, discard, abolish.
- ❖ **vulnerable** (adjective) – unprotected, unguarded, helpless; relating to a weak/neglected person who is in need of special care/support.
- ❖ **concurrent** (adjective) – relating to the list which includes the power to be considered by both the union and state government (as given in the Seventh Schedule to the Constitution of India).
- ❖ **nod** (noun) – indication, signal, sign (of approval).
- ❖ **disinclined** (adjective) – reluctant, unwilling, unenthusiastic, unprepared.
- ❖ **amidst** (preposition) – amid, in the middle of; during.
- ❖ **Employees' Provident Fund** (EPF) (noun) – a retirement savings scheme in which employees of an organisation contribute a small portion of their basic pay monthly. In the same line, the employer also contributes a similar amount on their behalf towards the scheme.
- ❖ **amount to** (verb) – be equal to, be equivalent to, represent, be regarded/considered as.
- ❖ **hygiene** (noun) – cleanliness.
- ❖ **scared** (adjective) – frightened, afraid, worried.
- ❖ **pandemic** (noun) – the worldwide spread of a new disease; The illness spreads around the world and typically affects a large number of people across a wide area.
- ❖ **subside** (verb) – diminish, decline, abate, get lower.
- ❖ **enthusiastically** (adverb) – eagerly, keenly, wholeheartedly.
- ❖ **reorient** (verb) – change the focus on.
- ❖ **front** (noun) – a particular situation.
- ❖ **(ineffective) paper laws** (noun) – the laws which are only on paper, but fail to achieve the objective for which they are enacted.
- ❖ **inter-** (prefix) – between.
- ❖ **thereafter** (adverb) – after that, subsequently.