

## Torpid work culture

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**PEON, a Mexican word, means an agricultural worker in servitude to his landlord. Peonage is labourers' involuntary servitude with little control over their employment conditions. Historically, peonage existed in the colonial era, in areas under Spanish rule, especially in Latin America. In South Asian English 'peon' is an office boy, attendant or an orderly kept around to perform errands/odd jobs. The softness of the South Asian usage notwithstanding, the similarity in practice with the Mexican usage is hard to miss.**

Do all countries have peons in offices to perform odd jobs such as serving tea, carrying files from one office to

another, and standing in queue at banks to pay their bosses' personal utility bills?

How do peons, drivers and personal secretaries influence cost, efficiency and hence economic growth? To gauge what peons, drivers and personal secretaries have to do with growth, one only need look at whether these institutions are found in, say, the top 30 economies of the world. If not, then why not? Do the East Asian Tigers or China have these institutions?

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### **How about doing away with the peon in the public sector?**

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An online advertisement for an office boy in Singapore specified the following duties; clear the office desk, top up papers in printer cabinets, tidy up production room and switch on photocopier machines. Conspicuous omissions include: serving tea/coffee, carrying files and paying the boss's utility bills.

Can we reform the system? It would not be easy. Why? Because reforms generate winners and losers — would-be losers block reforms. To make reforms acceptable, how about beginning with people at the top? We praise the good office practices of the West; no peons, no drivers and personal secretaries, only for a few at the very top. Officers do their own photocopying and make tea themselves, executives carry their own bags and open car and office doors themselves. How about learning from the (wild) West?

How about doing away with the peon, the driver and the personal secretary (for most of the people) in public sector? Imagine the merits. With no peon posted outside the office door of senior officials, corruption would be curbed. Minus tea, official meetings would be shorter.

Besides the obvious cost-saving, the no-peon culture would help introduce e-governance — with no one to distribute the 'circulars' around the office, people would prefer to email. Photocopying expenditures, demand for photocopying machines and the import bill would be reduced.

Tea party-less offices would help slash gossip and leg-pulling clubs. Alternate places for discussing national politics would have to be discovered. Accountants involved in preparing payrolls of the peons, drivers and the personal secretaries would no longer be needed. The same goes for their supervisors and those maintaining their personal files.

The idea has implications for welfare, politics and literacy. Hundreds of thousands of people would lose their jobs. The job-losers would be on the roads saying 'down with the government'. Political parties in opposition would try to make the most of the opportunity at hand.

The solution lies in doing this very gradually, maybe over a span of a decade or two. We may begin with putting a lid on the recruitment of peons and drivers and by offering handsome voluntary handshakes. The handshakes could even include loans to the employees to engage in entrepreneurial activity.

The scarcity of unskilled, blue-collar jobs would encourage more schooling. But then poverty would inhibit schooling. Peons or no-peons, compulsory schooling for the poor financed by the state is called for in any case. To finance higher education for the poor, the students' loan model practised in the West is worth replication. With the technology possessed by Nadra and the enactment of some laws favouring loan recovery, tracing on the job borrower-graduates and ensuring repayment to the bank should not be difficult.

Minus drivers and official cars, how can the official chores that demand travel be performed? Based on actual data of a government office, I say with confidence that using air-conditioned taxis at Rs15 a kilometre plus the wait charges of Rs200/hour would prove to be much cheaper than the use of official cars that run 100 km on roads but 200 km on paper.

The use of air-conditioned taxis by government officers for official business would increase the demand for such taxis and hence the demand for drivers: the drivers losing jobs in the public sector may find jobs in private taxi companies that would mushroom. Side benefits include no idle people waiting endlessly to drive the boss somewhere or for him to come out of a meeting.

There is, however, a catch to all this. What if the peons and drivers ask, are we two the only costly entities in the public sector? The answer would lead to some soul-searching. That wouldn't be so bad.

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Published in Dawn, October 18th, 2015

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