

'LIVING ON THE EDGE'

The USA's 'Invisible' Poverty

Bibekananda Ray

"The hopes of the Republic cannot forever tolerate either undeserved poverty, or self-serving wealth." —Franklin D Roosevelt, US President (1933-1945)

Poverty in the USA' sounds like an oxymoron, but it does exist in this heaven of opulence and prosperity. The phrase is the reverse of the better-known rubric, the 'affluent society' that John Kenneth Galbraith coined and used in his 1958 eponymous book. In Satyajit Ray's last movie, *Aagantuk* (1991) a Bengali anthropologist, settled in America, tells a child that there are poor people in the USA too, who squat on city streets, holding placards, on which is written, "We are poor". This surprised viewers, because not many Bengalees knew then that there were poor in the USA. They are not ubiquitous as in India; the other day, I saw an unkempt young man near a shopping mall in Texas, holding a placard, on which he had written: "Out of job, single dad; please help". A few days later, in Houston Down Town, we saw two- a black woman and a white man- the latter with a guitar, begging. My grandson remembers a grey-beard white man in a tattered jacket, holding a placard with the writing: 'I would rather beg than steal'. Such beggars are seen more than before, these days, as tens of thousands of people have been laid off and retrenched during the economic downturn following the collapse of Lehmann Brothers, Meryl Lynch and Stanley Morgan in 2008, plunging the USA in a 'brutal recession'.

Stray beggars apart, the poor people and their colonies are not seen by travellers. In New York City, they are seen only in Subway stairs and coaches, where the black poor sell knickknacks. The city's Harlem and the slums of Chicago, Detroit, Michigan, and Pennsylvania are well-known black ghettos and slums of other poor people, some of which have figured in literature and movies. Trains Greyhound and other tourist buses do not ply through, or pass by, their habitats. Not for them, except as salesmen and girls, are the million and billion-dollar shopping malls and chain stores. They throng one-dollar shops, like 'Dollar Tree' (previously '99 cent') where every thing sells for a buck. They are the invisible warts on the USA's fair face, which the federal and the 50 State governments discreetly hide from public view. Currently, on the Internet, a NGO solicits donations on the web: "One in six Americans is fighting hunger and we need your help to join us in the fight". The US's poverty is neither confined to the non-whites, nor to rural areas; it exists in many white families and in urban slums and ghettos too; the African-Americans, the new term for 'Negroes', are one-fourth of the poor.

OFFICIAL DATA

Their number swells every year, though with swinging percentages, ever since the federal government launched a 'war on poverty' in 1964. Currently, at least 35.9 million, i.e. one in nine US citizens are poor. Successive government policies to ameliorate poverty and reduce their number have rendered them invisible. They constitute about 11.51% of the USA's total population (311.77 million, nearly 4.5% of the world. Out of 350 billion pounds (about 158.76 million tonnes) of food available annually in the USA, about 100 billion pounds (about 45.36 million tonnes), worth about \$43 billion, are wasted. According to the *Bread for the World Institute*, 3.5% of US households, in which 9.6 million, including three million children, live frequently skip meals, or eat less, or sometimes go without food for a whole day. Some 33 million US citizens live in households that do not have an adequate supply of food. According to the US Department of Agriculture, up to one-fifth of the country's food, worth around \$31 billion is wasted every year, with which roughly 49 million hungry people could be fed.

A 2009 survey, in the first year of Obama's Presidency however, showed the US poverty situation 'turning round'. From 2007, the year before the 'Great Recession', almost four million wage-earners were being retrenched, adding to the poverty; more new-born babies were growing up poor. Although

health insurance was introduced in 1987, over 51 million citizens are still uncovered and have been insured by the governments. Poverty has deepened for nearly all races and ethnicities in the last four years, except for Asians, whose median household income continues to be the highest among minorities, although they complain of racial discrimination. Although President Obama credits government programmes for not letting the situation go worse, conservatives hold their failure to blame. The federal government's definition of poverty is based on total income and for 2011 it has been set at \$22,350 for a family of four, i.e. a little over a million rupees; it is described as "the state of one who lacks a usual or socially acceptable amount of money or material possessions". It uses two ways to measure poverty- the poverty thresholds and the poverty guidelines median household income- issued by the US Census Bureau and the Department of Health, respectively. 'Poverty thresholds', named after Mollie Orshansky, an economist working for the Social Security Administration, set monthly income up to \$22,541 (a little more than a million rupees) as the federal poverty-line for a family of four with no children under 18 years for 2010; it has been reduced by \$291 to \$ 22350 in the current year. Overall, 21% of US's children live in poverty; of them, about 46% are African-American, 40% Latino and 14 % belong to other poor minorities, which make their lifestyle and upbringing very different from the White children's.

President L B Johnson announced an 'Unconditional War on Poverty' on 16th March 1964 and in the next four years his Administration spent billions to eradicate it. The number of the poor in the two US census years, before and after that year- in 1959 and in 1969, were over 38.68 million (22.1% of total) and over 27.12 million (13.7% of total), respectively. President Johnson's public policies did reduce poverty and unemployment percentages; in Medicare particularly, there was quantum jump, although its effect was eroded by inflation. The drive against poverty became so frenzied in four years of President Johnson that in 1968, Richard Nixon in his campaigns promised to slow it down. A year after he came to power, in 1969, his top domestic adviser, Arthur Burns wished away US poverty as an 'intellectual concept', based on 'artificial statistics'. Opulent USA is the refrain in politicians' speeches, on TV channels and magazines, not unexpectedly, because nearly 312 million people of this huge continent (9.83 million km²), three times the size of India, have the highest average standard of living in the world.

The first statistical study of poverty was made for the Kennedy Administration by an economics professor, Robert Lampman in the Universities of California and Wisconsin. He estimated the number of 'low-income people' to be between 16% and 36% of the then total population of 36 million. His chapter on poverty in the 1964 Economic Report of the President Kennedy was the basis for the anti-poverty policy of the Johnson Administration, for which he was called 'the intellectual architect of the war on poverty'. His most well-known view was that economic growth alone would not banish poverty. He advocated negative income tax for the poor to provide for them a guaranteed income. His measure of poverty (in the early 1960's) was annual income below US\$ 3000 per family. In another major study of US poverty, Michael Harrington, a member of the US Socialist Party in his book, 'The Other America', held that there were 'perennial reasons' for poverty in the USA and that 'beauty and the myths' about the USA were its 'perennial masks'. "Here is a great mass of people, yet it takes on effort of the intellect and will even to see them", he wrote in 1969.

The programmes to alleviate poverty that President Johnson launched were meant to be temporary and short-term, but they were so time-tested that after 44 years they were incorporated in the Obama Administration's, with dozens more added. Now, the spending on State welfare programmes (adjusted for inflation) is 13 times more than in 1964. President Obama's 2011 budget proposed increased spending on welfare programmes by 42% over President Bush's last year in office. In early 2011, he raised the government spending on poverty alleviation to \$953 billion. There are now over 70 means-tested welfare programmes for the poor and low-income people, like food stamps, public housing, Medicaid, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. Although designed for the poor, the means-tested programmes have been extended to families of four who earn about \$44 thousand per year; thus they cover close to one-third of the US population. Every such family is eligible for about \$28 thousand worth of federal and State welfare benefits, per year. Many government and non-government agencies are

striving to reduce poverty and its effects by targeting specific groups, such as children, the autistic, immigrants and the homeless by publicity, education, social work, legislation, direct service or charity and community organizing. Far from ending, the war on poverty is escalating its immanence even after 4½ decades since it was launched by President Johnson. The ruling Democratic party admits the blacks' steady loss of income. Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State said in January 2008 that in "the last seven years, the average African-American family has lost \$2,600 in income". The blacks were 12.6% of the population in the last census in 2010 (one in eight), while the whites were 72.4%, of whom 63.7% were of Hispanic and Latin origins. Among naturalized blacks 11.8% are poor, compared to 25.1% of native born blacks.

Factors, contributing to the persistence of poverty in the USA are many. Income varies with education levels of earning members of a family; it also varies with age, race and ethnicity. Work experience and additional education may enhance income too. Not all minorities have low incomes. In many cases, poverty is caused by job loss. Illegal immigration increases job competition among low-wage earners, both native and foreign. Many first generation immigrants without a high school diploma are also living in poverty. Some sociologists and government officials think, the poverty in the US is officially understated. For example, Ms Orshansky admits that the actual 'poverty threshold' is roughly 70% more than the official 'poverty threshold'. Fluctuations in local markets are not considered in the Federal poverty threshold and thus, leave out a lot of poor.

Traditionally and at present, the poorest in the US are the African-Americans, Mexicans, Vietnamese and other Asian immigrants, both legal and illegal, the unemployed and the under-employed, people of depressed regions, the ageing, the 'native Americans' (the new name for 'Red Indians') and a few Americans. They are confined to certain cities, areas and places where they were born, migrated to and still are- Harlem and Brewery in New York City, the ghettos around Chicago, Vietnamese habitats in Alhambra in Los Angeles, Camden in New Jersey, Alameda in Houston and so on. Harlem, like Mumbai's Dharavi, is world-famous and has figured in many movies of Hollywood. Generally, old America's poverty and misery have been depicted in the movies by Charles Chaplin, John Huston, John Ford and Alfred Hitchcock, in novels and stories of Harriet Beecher Stowe, Mark Twain, John Steinbeck, Earnest Hemingway, O' Henry, William Faulkner, Herman Melville, Louisa May Alcott, James Fenimore Cooper, Stephen Crane, Upton Sinclair, John Updike, Katherine Anne Porter, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, Carlo Collodi, Eleanor H Porter and Jack London, in the poetry of Walt Whitman, Robert Frost, Emily Dickinson, Ezra Pound, early T S Eliot as well as in plays of Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams. Theodore Dreiser, Edith Wharton, James Agee and Richard Wright also depicted poverty, aesthetically and made it culturally significant and at the same time, socially and materially real. They gave voice to the marginalized poor- the beggars, tramps, share-croppers, and factory workers who persist in the US society. For a decade, from the 1920's to the 1930's, there was a so-called 'Harlem Renaissance' which saw an unprecedented outburst of creative and professional works by the black community.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Historically speaking, poverty in the USA began in the aftermath of the 'Dust Bowl' migration of the 1930's. The 'Dust Bowl', or the 'Dirty Thirties', was a period of severe dust storms, causing extensive ecological and agricultural damage to the US and Canadian prairies from 1930 to 1936 (in some areas until 1940). It was caused by severe drought, made worse by decades of extensive farming without crop rotation, fallow-land cover crops and other techniques to prevent wind erosion. For almost 70 years, white families of Oklahoma and neighbouring States migrated en massé to California. Although it was one out of many causes of poverty during the 1930's, the 'Dust Bowl' migration became the single most common image of the hardships of that decade. In this exodus, white Americans became victims of dire poverty too and created media hype. John Steinbeck in literature and Dorothea Lange in documentaries and still photographs left the most memorable impressions of it. Mrs Lange photographed ragged children and worried parents in tents and waiting for work during her tours in farm labour camps in 1936. John Steinbeck wrote a set of newspaper articles that year on the plight of migrants, but his first novel,

three years later, *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939) became a masterpiece on the episode. It was about an American family, which loses its Oklahoma farm to dust and avaricious bankers and then sets out for California to face even greater hardships; it was made into a memorable movie by John Ford in 1940. In the novel, set in 1930's California, a young girl breastfeeds a starving black medicine-man. Many of Ford's other movies too dealt with poverty milieu, notably 'Arrowsmith' (1932), *The Informer* (1933), 'Stagecoach' (1939), 'The Long Voyage Home' (1940) and 'How green was my valley' (1941).

Another blow to the poor came between 1950 and 1966, when a pro-rich federal policy aggravated poverty in the rural areas. The government paid billions of dollars to rich individuals and corporate farmers to help them mechanise agriculture and double-farming to enhance crop yield. This served to reduce land under cultivation and rendered millions of rural poor superfluous in farms. Some 5½ million black farmers and farm labour migrated to cities and swelled the number of urban poor. The World War-II caused a defence boom that took many migrant families out of farms and raised the wages of the remaining, but most of the poor remained where they were.

HARLEM: EPITOME OF BLACK POVERTY

Across the USA, 25.8% of African-Americans were below the federal poverty line in 2009, up from 24.7% in 2008; 21.0% of them lacked health insurance, up from 19.1% in 2008. Across the country, 44% of black households live in rented houses, but like jewels in a gutter, or as a Bengali saying goes, like 'lotuses on a dung heap', the African-Americans have excelled in many fields. Harlem in New York City is still the epitome of the lives and habitats of the urban black. A neighbourhood of Manhattan across the Brooklyn Bridge over the Hudson River, it has been, since the 1920's, a major residential, cultural, and business centre of African-Americans who began to arrive *en masse* from 1904. The 'Great Depression' which began with the Wall Street crash of October, 1929 and rapidly spread, worldwide, gave a body blow to the USA. The stock market crash ushered in a decade of high unemployment, poverty, low profits, deflation, falling farm incomes. The economy reached bottom in the winter of 1932-'33; then came four years of very rapid growth until 1937. Poverty was accentuated by the industrial recession after the World War-II, but New York's revival in the late 20th century improved Harlem too, but its poverty and backwardness persist. Unemployment in Harlem is more than twice of New York City and mortality is higher. Tuberculosis is the main killer and takes toll of blacks four times more than New York City's white population. A 1990 study revealed that a 15-year Harlem girl had a 65% chance of surviving to the age of 65 years, while black men have 37%. Infectious and circulatory system diseases take a huge toll too, the latter owing to taking of too much deep-fried food. The poverty of the blacks grew out of a long US history of discrimination which is seen even now in Harlem's economy. In it, the Man (white) is immanent in the guises of policeman, judge, rent collector and insurance agent.

Movies and documentaries continue to be made on poverty, generally in the offbeat genre, but Hollywood is yet to produce a movie on poverty as moving as *Pather Panchali* (1955) and several other films by Satyajit Ray. Social anxiety about poverty surfaces frequently in American literature and 'independent' movies. The theme of poverty continues to attract many Independent filmmakers. In 2009, there were at least 10 movies and documentaries, dealing with various aspects of poverty. 'Precious', based on a novel by Sapphire was about a very poor, pregnant (by incest), illiterate, young black woman in 1980's Harlem, who finds salvation through loving educators. 'War on Drugs' is about a single black mother of four in a Texas housing project. 'Sunshine Cleaning' was about a single-mother who cleans houses; when a police detective offers her a lucrative job for cleaning up a crime-scene she enlists her sister to join her. Such films often deal with complicated, nuanced and emotional relationships between the black poor and noble white folks who rescue them.

TRAVESTY OF 'AMERICAN DREAM'

The USA's poverty is a travesty of the 'American Dream', the national ethos, meaning all Americans have the right to prosperity and success. Historian, James Truslow Adams in 1931 popularized the phrase in his 1931 book, *Epic of America*: "The American Dream is the dream of a land in which life should be

better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement....It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but one of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position". The goal is also enshrined in the USA's Declaration of Independence to the effect that all men are created equal and are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights including those to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. To Martin Luther King Jr. the American dream was winning the freedom of the black, "because the sacred heritage of our nation and the eternal will of God are embodied in our echoing demands". It features in the Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin, in Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884), F Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* (1925), and Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* (1977). Other writers who wrote on the theme are John Steinbeck, Langston Hughes and playwright, Arthur Miller in his famous *Death of a Salesman* in which the protagonist strives to make his 'American dream' a reality. It is a recurring theme in ethnic literature as well in the fiction of Asian Americans. In 2006 while still a Senator Barack Obama, (US President from 20th January 2008) wrote a memoir, *The Audacity of Hope: Thoughts on Reclaiming the American Dream* earned his State-wide and national reputations.

SETBACKS TO POVERTY ALLEVIATION

There have been many setbacks to the government programmes to alleviate the poor. The USA's major social change came in the mid 1930's, following President Franklin D Roosevelt's two New Deals between 1933 and 1936. The second came in the 1960s, but it was sacrificed to Vietnam War (1965-1975). The 'right war' on poverty was given up for the 'wrong war' in Vietnam. It needed 700 thousand new recruits in the Army and a million new openings in the defence industry, but very few of the poor were taken in, or benefitted. When Martin Luther King Jr and Senator Robert Kennedy were killed, two months apart, on 4th April and 6th June 1968, respectively, the poor felt that Fate was taking away the leaders who understood and fought for them.

Dwight D Eisenhower proposed building of new cities and towns during his Presidency (1953-1961) and Richard Nixon's National Committee on Urban Growth policy proposed building 10 new cities and 10 new towns to accommodate 11 million people to meet housing shortage, but no government thereafter dared implement them. If they were, it would have benefitted a lot of the poor who live crammed in dingy slums and ghettos. In Nixon regime (1969 to 1974), the government blow to the poor was the hardest. His main adviser, Arthur Burns used to say that the poor people who receive State welfare were a burden on the hard working common man. The 'other America' is not impoverished in the same sense as some African countries where millions are hungry and homeless, but they are behind a high wall of difference with the affluent middle and rich class. America's poor are often fat for taking excessive cheap junk food like Hamburger.

Professor Rank, author of a 1994 book, *Living on the Edge: The Realities of Welfare in America* argues that despite great wealth, the US society as a whole has shirked its responsibility to ameliorate poverty, but instead built up an economic system to perpetuate it. He debunks the middle class's view that the poor themselves are responsible for their plight. The USA's white population generally puts the African-Americans in certain stereotypes which evolved particularly after slavery became a heritable racial institution. The minstrel shows of the 19th century portrayed blacks as joyous, naive, superstitious, ignorant, servile, primitive, or simpleminded. Stereotypes persist even now and the black are often portrayed as lazy, super-religious, violent and much too fond of fried chicken, water-melon, catfish, and Kool-Aid. The American Civil War (1861-1865) did outlaw slavery everywhere in the USA, but it persists in remote parts. In a compilation of 3000 photographs, called 'American Pictures' (1981), Danish vagabond, Jacob Holdt depicted the lingering effects of slavery in parts of the USA. He hitch-hiked some 100 thousand miles across the USA for five years from 1970 and took 3000 photographs the poverty and misery of more than 350 families of blacks, Indians and Chicanos in tumbled-down shacks. With these he gave a slide-show from 5th September 1984. Racism that erupted in the colonial and slave eras persists

in the USA. Formal racial discrimination was largely banned in the mid-20th century, yet racial discrimination continues in employment, housing, education, lending and government, extending to all coloured communities—African-Americans, Latin Americans and Muslims. European-Americans (particularly Anglo-Americans) were privileged by law in matters of literacy, immigration, voting rights, citizenship, land acquisition, and criminal procedure from the 17th century to the 1960's. European-Americans (particularly Anglo-Americans) were privileged in literacy, immigration, voting rights, citizenship, land acquisition, and criminal procedure from the 17th century to the 1960's. Particularly American Jews, Irish Americans and Eastern and Southern European immigrants, as well as other immigrants suffered severe forms of racism in the US society. These also contributed to persistence of poverty in the USA.

The US-led war on Iraq (19th March to 1st May, 2003), caused a setback to the UN-led global war against poverty and caused a setback to some of the UN-mandated social and economic goals all over the world, like eradication of disease, illiteracy and poverty by 2015. The direct cost on the six-week war was around \$704 billion, @ \$2 billion per week to \$12 billion a month, as per an estimate by economist Joseph Stieglitz. A Congressional Budget Office report said in October 2007 that the US wars in Iraq and Afghanistan could cost tax payers a total of \$2.4 trillion dollars by 2017, counting the interest payable, because combats are financed by borrowed money. The CBO estimated that of the \$2.4 trillion long-term price tag for the war, about \$1.9 trillion of that would be spent on Iraq, or \$6,300 per US citizen. According to Mr. Stieglitz, former chief economist of the World Bank and winner of the Nobel Prize in Economics, the total costs of the Iraq War, incurred by the USA, will be three trillion dollars in a moderate scenario, and possibly more. The extended combat and equipment loss placed a severe financial strain on the US Army, causing cuts in non-essential expenses such as travel and civilian hiring. The 2007-2008 Great Recession compounded the drive against poverty and in the job loss of millions all over the USA, the poor were also affected. The renowned AFL-CIO (American Federation of Labour and Congress of Industrial Organisations) ameliorates industrial workers, but not the poor. It is the largest federation of 56 national and international labour unions in the United States, formed in 1955 by merger of the AFL and the CIO and in 1908 represented more than 11 million workers.

In slums and ghettos, the juvenile engage in gang rivalry and fights, but stay close to their habitats. They are politically invisible, being unable to speak for themselves, or having none to speak for them. The poor suffer discrimination under social security laws and could not supplement federal pension through private plans, negotiated by unions, or through medical insurance schemes, like Blue Cross. They became, in Galbraith's words, "the first poor not to be seen and the first poor the politicians could leave alone". Before 1930, majority of the US citizens was poor, sharing a general misery. A dying labour movement suddenly placed masses of men and women in basic industries. The New Deal of President Eisenhower passed trade union laws, like the Wagner Act in 1935, to uplift them and transform their lives. Also known as the National Labour Relations Act, the Wagner Act, named after Senator Robert F Wagner who fought for it, limited the means with which employers in the private sector could deal with their workers who were given the right to form labour or trade unions, engage in collective bargaining, and take part in strikes and other forms of concerted activities to push their demands. It did not cover only railway, agricultural and domestic workers, supervisors, federal, State or local government employees. The talented and skilled among the poor seized the opportunities, but the great mass remained poor; they and their offspring are among today's poor. Low IQ, disease and alcoholism kept them where they were before the 1930s. In New York City, 80 Warren Street used to be called the 'Slave Market', because every morning Puerto Rican and African blacks, alcoholics, drifters and mentally disturbed people flocked here, looking for work, but only those who can work in kitchens and sweatshops got steady jobs. Each US city has an economic underworld in which the minorities, the disabled and the retarded live and toil.

In the USA, as technology advances, the educated, talented and those who understand machines move up; those who do not lag behind. The economy, booming after the Industrial Revolution, to use a cliché, made the rich richer and the poor poorer. They fall ill oftener than the middle class and the rich for

living in awfully dense and unhygienic slums. They lose wages and work and cannot hold to steady jobs. In their habitats, there are more homes without either, or both parents, less or broken marriages and more teenage and pre-marriage pregnancies. *Their misfortune is that they were born to wrong parents, in wrong places and in wrong times.* Children do not get normal affection of siblings and parents. The US police protect the rich and the middle class, but not the poor as much. If a cop looks for a man in a slum or a ghetto, he gets the stock answer from dwellers that they have not heard of, or seen, such a person. The police, bill collectors and investigators often draw a blank in slums. In the USA, the alcoholics and drug addicts- mostly Polish, Italian and Blacks (never a Jew) - among the poor concentrated in Bowery area of New York City and gave it a surrealistic look. The aged among the poor are the most pathetic; their number is increasing because of advances in medicine, health care and low fertility and low migration in the US society, weakening the traditional props for the poor. Even without poverty, they are lonely and isolated. The misery of their old age is the culmination of a life of poverty and misery, compounded by chronic diseases. Governments are building public houses in slums and ghettos, giving burial to old slums like Kerry Patch, Little Italy etc, but they have segregated the new poor from the mainstream of the US society. In these, juveniles have formed violent gangs like 'Phantom Lords' and 'Hell Barriers'. Only a Charles Dickens can recreate their world movingly.

Some of today's old and unskilled blacks were rejects of high-paying industries in Detroit, Michigan, Pennsylvania and Chicago. As Prof John Dunlop of Harvard University puts it, in the 1930's there was mass unemployment in the USA, but since after the World War-II, unemployment has been confined to certain classes. As agriculture was mechanised and thrived, there was a vast exodus of farmers and farm labour to cities. In the early 1960s, nearly a million unmechanised farms bred poverty and backwardness; their owners did not get even a cent in subsidy. In the mountainous State of Appalachian, agriculture became so unproductive with short growing seasons that in the 1950's, about 1.5 million of farmers left their habitats and flocked to urban slums and ghettos. Southern USA has long seen concentrations of rural poverty Virginia, West Virginia, South Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas and Louisiana, in fact the whole area from the mid-Atlantic coast to the south and to the west. Racism is ordinarily not seen, or felt, but offices are still its bastion. Resistance to hiring the black is still very intense. The situation reminds an old doggerel: "If you are white, you are right. / If you are black, stay back."

The black unemployment, nationwide, before the Great Recession, was 16.2%, far higher than the 8.7% rate for whites. Yet nearly 20% of black workers are employed by the government and with the States and cities under pressure to cut back government spending on public employees, the percentages will further decline. Black unemployment since April 2010 has swung between 15.4% and 16.3%, and is currently at 16.2%. For more than half a century, the black unemployment rate, often understated, has been running at twice the rate of the white. Teenage unemployment is particularly dismal, hovering around 40%. The situation suggests that attaining or maintaining middleclass status is increasingly difficult for black youth. The three paths that earlier black generations- work in the unionized manufacturing sector, public sector employment and more recently college and graduate education- either do not function, or are much less reliable conduits to social mobility than they were even a decade ago. These economic trends will have dire political consequences. Public opinion data, collected over the past 20 years, reveal severe black disillusion about racial equality. By 2005, four out of five blacks believed that racial equality would not be achieved in the foreseeable future. The percentage declined by 30 points further by October 2008 on the eve of the Presidential election of Barack Obama on 5th November 2007. All these hasten a more volatile and conflicted racial landscape in the USA.

"Poverty is the parent of Revolution", said Aristotle, but no Revolution by, or for, the poor in the USA is likely, because they lack a strong voice in politics and are largely invisible behind the high wall of affluence of nearly three-fourths of all Americans. □□□