

How young India views jobs and work

This election season has seen a lot of heated debate around unemployment, especially how the youth are distressed by the lack of jobs.

An interesting question to ask is: How do the affected parties— the youth themselves — see the job situation through the prism of their life and world view? What do they think and feel about it? Are they angry and incensed? Resigned and defeated? Wary and anxious? Or NOTA on all these feelings?

As with last month's column ("How Young India views the world and polls"), this piece is also based on the findings of the ethnographic study, *Drivers of Destiny*¹, the details of which were discussed in the previous column. The segment of youth studied was designed to be representative of the "leading edge" of "middle India" — college-educated individuals (from a variety of colleges and courses), residing in urban areas (comprising large and small towns across India), and belonging to the lower middle and middle-income groups. This does not equate to the popular perception of "middle class", which actually denotes the richest 40 per cent of Indian households). Many in this group were first-generation college goers in their families. This segment represents "emerging India", "aspirational India", and using the India 1-2-3 framework of retail entrepreneur Kishore Biyani, not quite India 2 but almost there — that is, not privileged enough to access the networks of India 1, but not poor enough to be unaware or unable to strive for opportunities out there.

The headline is that this "bellwether" swathe of young India is not deeply distraught or feeling angry or hopeless about the lack of jobs. It appears to be a wholly different India compared to the one portrayed by Bachchan's angry young man in the Bollywood movies of the 1970s, or the young people of *Mere Apne* frittering

away their lives waiting for someone to employ them.

First of all, in keeping with the mostly self-employed "own account worker", or gig working population that we have become, the word they use is "kaam" (work) not "naukri" (employment). There is definite awareness that work is hard to find and not easily available without effort. There is a constant striving to look for and find work and this is a big theme of their lives that comes through loud and clear. They also say "we are trying hard, it is difficult (*mushkil*), but working is a must".

However, interestingly, the ethnographers did not hear this phrased as a "problem". There was, typically, a portfolio of work and a constant churn in that portfolio depending on what showed up next (horrific attrition rates in many sectors are probably a result of this).

However, despite this short-term view of work, there is a significant amount of hopefulness that better things will happen for them. This optimism is fuelled by selective perception from the hyperactive information environment they live in, coupled with the flip side of selective denial. In the last column, we pointed out the narrow, parochial lens of "me, my surroundings, my life" through which they view the world. Through this lens, the view seems to be "I am ok, I can do it". There is a surprising amount of resilience and openness to try. "I will try this, if it doesn't work or I can't succeed, I will try something else".

Their internet- and social media-embraced lives are continuously inundated with information. There are multiple discourses that they are engaged with on how to be successful (YouTube is full of them) and social media plays a huge influencing role in showing role models who have turned their passion into income streams. All this causes a considerable amount of

entropy inside them, and constantly looking for work brings physical and mental tiredness, and fatigue.

While they are not unhappy, what would make them really happy is a government job. It is a symbol to them of stability, predictability, status, standing, and a life that is "*set ho gaya*". UPSC, RBI, state government competitive exams are all on their radar. These jobs symbolise meritocracy and a real shot at opportunity (though not an easy one). At the other end of the spectrum is a small segment of uber-hustlers who are convinced that they can play the financial markets to great benefit.

Another really interesting finding was that they don't have any particular awareness of the structural mechanisms that deliver jobs (echoing what we said in the last column that they didn't see government as much more than a utility). They don't see it as anybody's responsibility to create jobs for them. They view jobs as a product of "the market", created by an invisible force (our words not theirs). With this "market" view of jobs, it is nobody's fault that it is so hard to find work.

The story is one of tremendous agency ("individual ability to affect the environment") coming up against a hugely unhelpful, inhospitable structure ("conditions in the environment that limit choices"). Their agency may well be our saving grace — for now. It is also a call to think about swiftly providing different kinds of structural support. Perhaps this could be through financial inclusion for middle India, improved marketplaces, and enhanced infrastructure to enable their gig working life to be less fatiguing and difficult.

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1. The Drivers of Destiny Project is led by Mathangi Krishnamurthy, associate professor of Anthropology, IIT Madras, and commissioned by this columnist



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