

Work Life of the Youth in the Times of COVID-19:***Perplexed State of Mind, Especially for Young Indian Women***Ritika Gupta¹ and Anshula Mehta²**Backdrop**

India being the second most populous country and fastest growing major developing economy of the world is in the phase of “demographic dividend”. India can exploit its potential and contribute more to the economic growth harnessing its young labour force. According to Census 2011, more than half of the youth population (aged 15-29) is under working and about a quarter of the population is absorbed by youth in labour market. Every year, 10 million of the youth add to the labour force, expanding the bulge of unemployed youth (Sharma and Mehta, 2017).

According to Periodic Labour Force Survey (PLFS) 2017-18, the youths in India share nearly 28% of the total population. The worker participation rate for the youth in urban areas is 31.4%. The unemployment rate among the urban male youth was 18.7% while for urban female youth was 27.2%. The main challenges that the youth face while they enter the labour market are: jobs that do not match their education, outdated skills that do not address the labour demand, and a lack of knowledge on where and how to look for jobs (PLFS, 2018).

Moreover, the sectoral composition shows that there is a gradual shift from agricultural sector and manufacturing sector to non-manufacturing and services sector. Although service sector employment has increased, non-manufacturing sector jobs did not

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grow much to compensate the employment fall in both agriculture and manufacturing. The rural-urban migration among youth is highest among the males who dream of a high paying job, good quality of education and in turn good quality of life. But they end up in the despair migration crisis amidst slow supply of such opportunities. The gig economy is the silver lining while dealing with mass unemployment in the country. However, labour market in gig economy is characterized by no or low security benefits, no regular wages or full-time jobs, thus they have low savings.

The Gender Divide

Youth unemployment in India is also characterized by “gender divide”. The work participation rate in general for males is around three-fifth whereas for females it is one-fifth. The youth unemployment rate for females and males who are graduate and above is 47.7% and 29.7% respectively. This vast difference shows that the Indian labour market is not only failing at creating adequate jobs but also depicting its favouritism towards males.

Educated youth female unemployment (graduate and above) is the highest in the backward and north-eastern states. But the difference is also visible in the most forward states such as Kerala and Goa. The following figure shows that the unemployment rates among women is almost double in some states as compared with all India average and greater than their counterpart.

Social and Psychological Facets

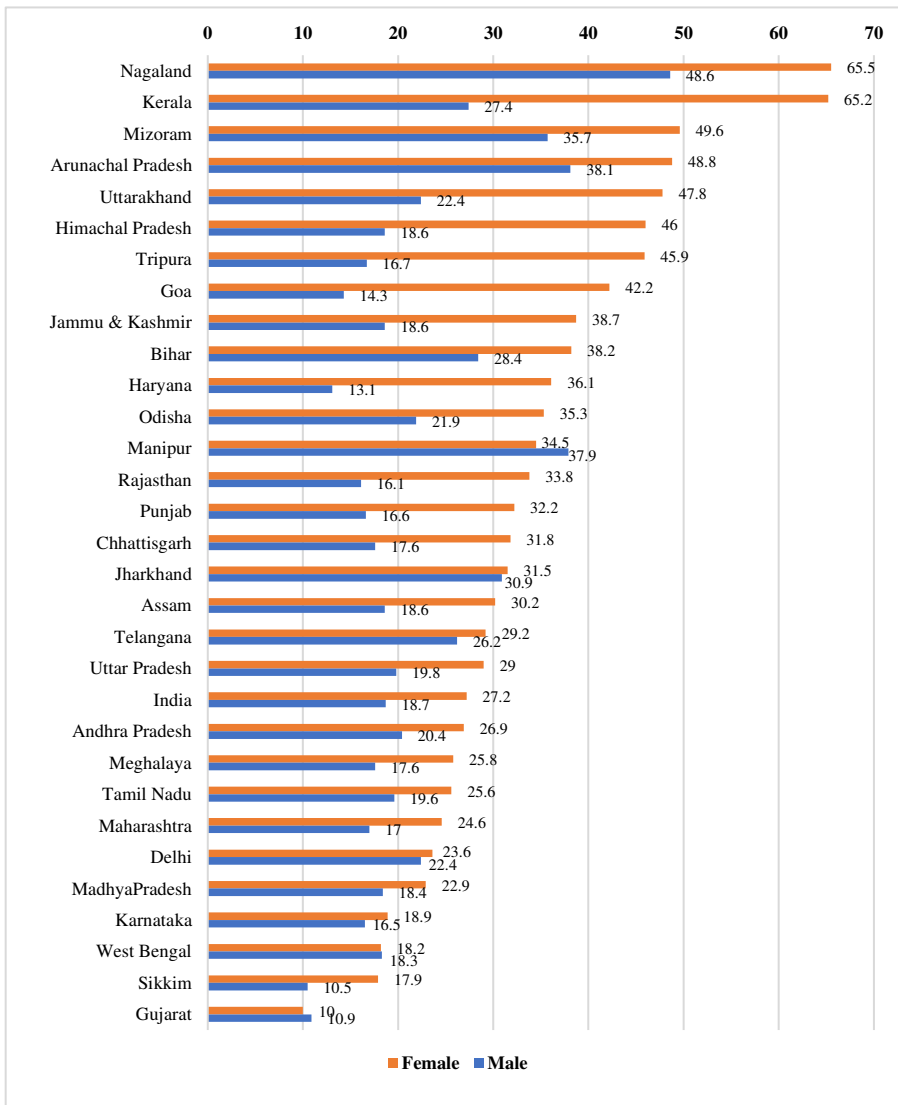
In recent decades, there have been significant achievements in terms of educational attainment, both in school (almost universal attainment) and higher education (more than one-third enrolment) especially for girls. According to Report on Youth Employment and Unemployment Scenario by Labour Bureau 2015-16, 38.4%

of those who are graduate and above are unemployed in the country. The other problem is that when the youth attains a high degree of education, his/her aspirations for higher paying jobs increases and non-availability of jobs matching these aspirations leads to high educated unemployment, especially in urban areas.

Youth are more grossed in the work-study choice dilemma coupled with limited opportunities and ever-expanding competition, which result in a perplexed state of mind. The mental stress of aspiring to secure a permanent employment (often in the government), getting a good paying job and attaining higher education often results in underemployment and unemployment.

The cultural factors which contribute to low labour participation rates for young women include denial from the families, no access and affordability for higher education, expectations of being a homemaker and fear of sexual harassment, etc. Even the most elite and educated societies of the country are held by patriarchy and despise females stepping outside for work. Youth is considered to be a prime age for maternity phase; thus, they relinquish their work after bearing children.

Figure 1: Gender-wise unemployment rates for the youth (15-29) in urban areas



Source: PLFS 2017-18

Challenges and Opportunities

Youth employment in India is a paradoxical situation. Despite many vacancies reported online by various job portals, the unemployment prevails. The main reasons for this contradictory situation are institutional failure, ill-organized labour market, the mismatch between the skills demanded by the employer and what the candidate possesses, etc. There has been an apparent shift in demand towards specialized high-end technical skills (e.g. artificial intelligence, automation, cloud technology, Internet of Things) and soft skill sets (e.g. analytical and problem-solving, interpersonal, communication and ability to work in teams). The sectors in which demand for jobs has increased are information technology, e-commerce, financial technology, health care, logistics and the automotive industry. According to PLFS, only 4.4% persons have received technical trainingⁱ among youth workforce. The challenge which youth face is demand driven employment and supply driven education due to lack of interface between industry and educational institutions.

The current government has come out with various schemes to make Indian youth *Atma Nirbhar* (self-reliant). The various flagship programmes such as Prime Minister's Employment Generation Programme and Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana aim at providing subsidized loans for establishing the manufacturing and service units. To promote employment generation, government came up with Pradhan Mantri Rozgar Protsahan Yojana under which it is paying the entire amount towards EPF and EPS for all eligible new employees for all sectors for 3 years. Other schemes include Start Up India, Stand Up India and Pradhan Mantri Mudra Yojana.

The types of jobs available to young people are more heterogeneous and unstable. Thus, there is a need for a scheme which provides assured employment in the urban areas. The employers need to expand the apprenticeship and internship

programmes focusing more on developing the technical skills. The educational institutes should develop the curriculum as per the requirements of the industry to efficiently tap the demographic dividend. There is a need for shifting the burden of employment from service sector to other economic activities such as manufacturing and non-manufacturing sectors of the country.

COVID-19 and Youth at Work

According to the report of CMIE, 27 million of the youth (age group 20-23 years) have lost their jobs because of the pandemic. Due to nationwide lockdown, the halt in the economic activities and mobility hindered the economic activities, thus, to cut out the expenses, employers' resort to layoffs. Youth bear the brunt and are rendered jobless in the times of crisis. This has resulted in lost earnings, greater costs and slower economic recovery in future.

Understandably, the young Indians, especially the women are facing the multiple burnt of the Coronavirus pandemic. The dimension of higher education, limited opportunities, and now the restrictive mobility post the pandemic, have led to the most troublesome situation for the youth. The challenges and evolving scenario are compounding the already burdened youth with worry. Nonetheless, provided with the right direction and support ecosystem, the resilient and aspirational young Indians will be the front soldiers against the fight against coronavirus pandemic. Empowered young Indians can lead us towards the vision of New India and make our great nation “*Vishwa-Guru*”.

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ⁱ Aerospace and aviation, agriculture, non-crop based agriculture, food processing, allied manufacturing- gems and jewellery, leather, rubber, furniture and fittings, printing , artisan/ craftsman/ handicraft/ creative arts and cottage based production, automotive, beauty and wellness, chemical engineering, hydrocarbons, chemicals and petrochemicals, civil engineering-construction, plumbing, paints and coatings, electrical, power and electronics, healthcare and life sciences, hospitality and tourism, iron and steel, mining, earthmoving and infra building, Information Technology (IT) and IT-enabled services (ITeS), logistics, mechanical engineering-capital goods, strategic manufacturing, media-journalism, mass communication and entertainment, office and business related work, security, telecom, textiles and handlooms, apparels, work related to childcare, nutrition, pre-school and crèche, etc.